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**SEPTEMBER 2021** ANTI-SEMITISM

## New York City's Kristallnacht Remembering the horror of Crown Heights 30 years

later by Edward Kosner

D KOCH CALLED IT "A POGROM." SO DID RUDY GIULIANI. THE Reverend Al Sharpton—the chubby, agitating, last-century version—led a march along the streets as rioting young blacks

rampaged through the neighborhood looking for Jews and Jewish businesses to attack. Hasidim cowered behind their mezuzahtrimmed doors while the sluggish police ducked rocks and bottles. New York's first African-American mayor, the courtly David Dinkins, showed up, hoisted a bullhorn, and tried to pacify the mob. "Will you listen to me for just a minute?" he pleaded. "No!" they responded, trying to stone him.

"I care about you. I care about you desperately," he shouted.

"Arrest the Jews!" they demanded.

That was the raw scene 30 years ago, in August 1991, when the worst race rioting in modern New York memory engulfed Crown Heights in

shared the neighborhood with a heavily outnumbered community of Jews, most of them Lubavitcher Hasidim. The convulsive episode

condescended to them.

drove Dinkins's handpicked black police commissioner back to Houston and helped doom his mayoralty, but not before that commissioner's successor, Ray Kelly, began to reenergize the police force. This, in turn, gave momentum to Rudy Guiliani's more muscular regime once he had defeated Dinkins in the mayoral election two years later. Even today, many of the details about the traffic accident that touched off the riot and its deadly aftermath are in dispute, despite a 656-page investigatory report commissioned by Governor Mario Cuomo that was released two years after the event. The question for the future is whether Crown Heights was a one-time, perfect-storm explosion—or possibly an augury for Jews.

trouble between blacks and Jews before, but nothing on its ferocious scale. Some friction was inevitable because for decades poor blacks had done much of their food and clothing shopping at stores owned and run by Jews, lived in tenements owned or managed by Jews, and often worked as maids or janitors in Jewish homes and apartment houses. To be sure, many liberal New York Jews had been active in the civil-rights movement, contributing to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, journeying south as freedom riders, and—as in the case of Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman—dying for the cause at the hands of Dixie racists. But it was also true that some working-class Jews closer to them geographically and on the social ladder lived in fear of blacks or

Crown Heights was not the only black-Jewish controversy of 1991.

College's concrete campus in West Harlem. Jeffries had a litany of

accusations against the Jews, among them that they had helped

finance the slave trade and made movies that hurt and demeaned

blacks, who were (he said) "sun" people, not malign "ice" people like

who was the chairman of the black-studies department at City

There was the matter of Leonard Jeffries, an outspoken Afro-centrist

When Crown Heights erupted, I had been the editor of New York

magazine for more than a decade. There had been flickerings of

Jews, Italians, Irish, and other whites. That Jeffries did his demagoguing at CCNY (my alma mater) was especially inflammatory because the all-but-free college had for years been a beacon for smart young Jewish students unwelcome in the Ivy League or too poor to pay a private college's tuition. Jeffries was stripped of his department chairmanship despite a fervent defense from Al Sharpton—himself fresh from the notoriety he earned for his stewardship of Tawana Brawley, a black teenager who falsely claimed she had been raped by a white man. Sharpton identified the rapist as Steven Pagones, a local district attorney. Pagones later sued and won a defamation case against Sharpton, Brawley, and another rabble-rouser named Alton Maddox—who declared in a speech that New York State attorney general Robert Abrams, a Jew, had masturbated to Brawley's photo. Such was the tone of the time.

Members of the Hasidic Jewish community talk to police about more police presence to prevent further violence in Crown Heights, Aug. 21, 1991. (AP Photo/Andrew Savulich) Sharpton figured in a later incident at a clothing store run by a Jewish businessman on West 125th Street, Harlem's main commercial strip. In 1995, a black Pentecostal church that owned the property on which Fred Harari operated Freddie's Fashion Mart asked him to evict his subtenant, a record store run by a black South African. Harari tried to

comply, whereupon Sharpton led protests at the store over the planned

eviction and because Harari had no black employees. "We will not

stand by and allow them to move this brother," he shouted, "so that

some white interloper can expand his business." It didn't seem to

matter that the "white interloper" had been told to evict the black

tenant by the store's black church owners. Within a few days, a black

man set fire to the store. The arsonist stood by the only exit with a

revolver, shot at two cops, and hit four customers trying to flee the

building dead of smoke inhalation.

flames. Later, firemen found seven others who had been trapped in the

But it was Crown Heights that really resonated throughout the city and resonates today. "It was a riot not by victims of racism, but by racists, an attack on Jews because they were Jews." wrote Philip Gourevitch in COMMENTARY two years afterward. One academic researcher pronounced it "the worst anti-Semitic incident in American history." The nightmare began prosaically. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the then-89-year-old leader of the Lubavitcher Hasidim, would travel to Queens to visit the grave of his wife each week. For the ride from his home in Crown Heights and back, the police routinely provided security, including an unmarked lead car with lights flashing. Schneerson had been under police protection since the 1960s to shield him from possible attack from rival Satmar Hasidim.

Schneerson's young disciples vied with one another for the honor of

escorting the small motorcade in their own cars. At 8:20 p.m. on

August 19, 1991, Yosef Lifsh, a 22-year-old rabbinical student, was

trailing Schneerson's car back from the gravesite heading west on

accelerated through—depending on who is telling the story—a yellow

or a red light and hit another automobile. Lifsh's car careened across

the intersection, mounted the curb, and slammed into seven-year-old

Gavin Cato and his cousin, Angelo Cato, also seven. Gavin, the child of

President Street. As the first two cars passed the Utica Avenue

intersection, the traffic light changed. Trying to keep up, Lifsh

Guyanese immigrants, was pinned under the car, his blood mixing with oil leaking from the wreck. His cousin was badly hurt. Lifsh testified to a grand jury later that he then jumped from the car to try to help Gavin but was seized by a crowd of black youths who pummeled him as he tried to call for help on his cellphone. A community ambulance sponsored by Orthodox Jews pulled up and hustled Lifsh and his passengers away—on orders from the police, it was claimed, to remove the target of the growing tension. Moments later, city ambulances arrived and took the Cato children to the hospital, where Gavin was pronounced dead. False rumors quickly spread through the neighborhood, including that

Lifsh had been drunk and didn't have a driver's license. Young blacks

on the streets started throwing rocks and bottles, and around 11 p.m.,

someone was said to have shouted, "Let's go to Kingston Avenue"—a

predominantly Jewish street—"and get a Jew." In less than an hour, a

score of black teenagers surrounded a 29-year-old Orthodox doctoral

student from Australia named Yankel Rosenbaum. They stabbed him

Kings County Hospital, possibly because emergency-room doctors

missed one of the stab wounds. But before he died, Rosenbaum

identified 16-year-old Lemrick Nelson Jr. as one of his attackers.

in the back and fractured his skull. Rosenbaum died soon afterward at

Rioters—many as young as 13 and 14—ravaged the neighborhood for the next three nights. "Kill the Jews," they shouted. "Hitler didn't do his job." And: "Get the cops." One of the mayor's own communityliaison staffers—a white man—was knocked unconscious with a brick and his car destroyed. Police swarmed the area but were uncharacteristically passive. They separated the blacks and Jews but did little to suppress the violence except pant fruitlessly after the speedy Nike-shod black teens. Ray Kelly was then the chief deputy to Dinkins's African-American police commissioner, Lee Brown, who came to the job from Houston and spent so much time away from police headquarters that he was known derisively as "Out-of-Town Brown."

In his 2016 memoir, Vigilance, Kelly writes: "I think the police

officials were all trying to second-guess the city's racial politics" under

a black mayor and commissioner and with another black police official

were trying to read the political risks to their own careers. The biggest

danger, police commanders may have calculated, was overreacting on

in charge of operations. "Some people said the police commanders

When Dinkins and Brown returned to Crown Heights on the third

night of the riots, the commissioner's own cruiser, code-named "Car

One," was trapped by the mob and stoned. Kelly, who had previously

the street. So they hardly reacted at all."

been a precinct commander in the neighborhood but was then an administrator with no line responsibility, heard the alarm back at headquarters and rushed to the scene. Brown asked him to take over. Kelly brought in 50 mounted police, a convoy of paddy wagons, and new tactics to seal off the streets and capture the rioters. The siege of Crown Heights was over. But not the recriminations. "In his eulogy for the dead child," Joe Klein wrote of Sharpton in the next issue of New York, he "placed Gavin Cato in a heavenly pantheon of the victims of white-racist violence. God had assured the Reverend Al that Gavin was up in Heaven's playroom. 'They introduced him to the four little girls who got killed in Birmingham...and don't worry, Yusuf

Hawkins and Michael Griffith, they're baby-sitting...They're gonna

bring him over and introduce him to his uncle Malcolm [X]." Klein

Despite the uproar, a grand jury found no cause to charge Lifsh, an

criminal-court jury exonerated Lemrick Nelson Jr. of fatally stabbing

outcome consistent with those in other such traffic accidents. A

Yankel Rosenbaum after the prosecution was mishandled by the

added: "Never mind that Uncle Malcolm was a victim of black-

sectarian violence."

authorities. Lifsh fled the U.S. and literally became a wandering Jew, taking refuge in Canada, Israel, and Russia. Al Sharpton flew into Ben Gurion airport a month after the riots and tried to serve Lifsh with papers in a \$100 million wrongful-death suit brought by Cato's parents. A group of Orthodox Jews recognized Sharpton at the airport. "Go to hell," they shouted. "I'm already there. I'm in Israel," Sharpton is reported to have replied. He flew home in a few hours when he failed to serve Lifsh and couldn't get U.S. diplomats to do it. Three decades on, many of those involved in the Crown Heights controversy are gone, including Dinkins and his predecessor, Ed Koch.

Rudy Giuliani has succeeded Roy Cohn as Donald Trump's aggressive

fixer, although without Cohn's chutzpah and skill. But Ray Kelly and

NYPD learned from the Crown Heights fiasco, in which 152 cops and

38 civilians were hurt. The department developed far more effective

disorder-control training and tactics, he says, but during his tenure,

protests and violence erupted in the city in May 2020 after the killing

Mayor Bill de Blasio has discarded that approach. So when mass

Al Sharpton are still around to reflect on the episode. Kelly told me the

of George Floyd, the cops struggled to contain the chaos. "If you ignore the lessons of the past, you're doomed to repeat them," Kelly says. "You have to keep learning them." Kelly thinks the next mayor, almost certainly the African-American former police captain Eric Adam, should take on the City Council to end the "reform" restrictions that hobble the police today. "They're not protecting the public," he says. "They're protecting their pensions." Sharpton is still sensitive to the criticism that he was a rabble-rouser in Crown Heights, not someone who led a peaceful march after Gavin Cato's funeral. He says now that he was reflecting the feelings of the Cato family and "the community" when the driver was not held to account—and hasn't been to this day. He thinks that black–Jewish tensions in the neighborhood have eased considerably, but that there is still friction and that Eric Adams should focus on conciliation.

Serious crime in the two precincts that constitute Crown Heights has

diminished more than 75 percent in the years since the riots—

although Kelly cautions that the way the statistics are now compiled may make the picture brighter than it actually is. Citywide, anti-Semitic incidents have increased significantly, with a late spike after the recent missile exchanges between Israel and Hamas based in Gaza. The perpetrators in these cases appear to be Muslim New Yorkers. African-Americans are involved in about a third of anti-Semitic hate crimes in New York these days, according to police figures. Video footage has also captured several incidences of surprise attacks on Orthodox Jews, suddenly beaten in the streets by black men after having been targeted because of their distinctive dress. Still, 30 years after their mini Kristallnacht, the Jews of Crown Heights feel more secure. "Times have changed and they have changed former head of Community Board 9 in Brooklyn. The Jewish

for the better," says Rabbi Jacob Goldstein, a state housing official and community, which was concentrated south of Eastern Parkway, has expanded deeply into streets largely dominated by blacks at the time of the riot, going north of that thoroughfare and into East Flatbush. And, despite the pandemic, the area is thriving economically. He agrees with Sharpton that relations between the Jews and the blacks have significantly improved. "There will always be tensions," he says. "We don't break bread together because we are who we are. Are

looking out for us." 1 Hawkins and Griffith were black youths who had been murdered by white mobs in New York City outerborough neighborhoods in the 1980s. We want to hear your thoughts about this article. Click here to send a letter to the editor.

there incidents? There are. But you don't have what we had. God is

Edward Kosner, who edited New York and the New York Daily News, among other publications, is the author of It's News to Me, a memoir.

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