

In August 1919 my great-grandfather was stabbed to death at his workplace in a widely-reported case the press called The Salford Works Murder. It wasn't until seventy years later that I learned the truth about what happened. Why had nobody in my family ever talked about this?

A Murder in the Family

Nicholas Ruddick

Hyman Perdovitch was born in Vilna, Russia in 1880. A Jew, he had moved to England as a young man, just before the turn of the century. For most of the time since then he had lodged with a Jewish family in Strangeways, an inner-city area of north Manchester known chiefly for the notorious prison that looms over it to this day. In July 1916, he had enlisted in the Border Regiment and was sent to France. He was then transferred to the Royal Irish Regiment and saw action at Ypres in August 1917. There, according to one report, he lost part of his left leg, though there is no indication that this wound was visible to others, or even that he walked with a limp. Having been awarded a war pension of thirteen shillings and twopence per week, he was invalided out of the army in August 1918.

In 1919 Perdovitch was living at 96 Albert Avenue in Sedgley Park, a middle-class suburb of neat semi-detached houses two and a half miles north of Strangeways. He had returned to his prewar job as a machinist at Wilks Brothers, a small waterproof clothing factory on Booth Street, Salford, that employed other war veterans as well as male and female apprentices, many of them Jewish. He attended Salford Royal Hospital for treatment to his wound, so he was often absent from work. Perdovitch felt that his foreman at Wilks resented his absences, gave him dirty jobs, treated him like a dog. However, with his army pension and a recent raise, he was making quite a decent living for a 39-year-old single man.

The foreman at Wilks was also Jewish, though he was not an immigrant: Solomon Franks, 49 years old, born in Manchester on 21 June 1870. He was the paterfamilias of a large Hightown family – he and his wife Betsy had five children between eight and 25 years old – and had worked at Wilks for about two years. Franks had been concerned about the disgruntled attitude of Perdovitch for some months. He had confided to a friend that he believed that the Russian machinist had “wanted to boss the room,” but had stated that he, Franks, would not be bossed. The friend had advised Franks to report Perdovitch to the firm’s administration, though there is no evidence that Franks did so.

On 12 August 1919, Morris Sherr, a seamer at Wilks, heard Franks ask Perdovitch, “Can I have that work out for today, Tuesday?”

Perdovitch snapped back, “You can have it when it suits me.”

At 8:25 on the morning of Friday 15 August, Perdovitch, who seemed more subdued than usual, asked Sherr to bring him a drink of water. A few minutes later, Franks walked past Perdovitch’s

bench towards the door leading to the yard. He was planning to open it to ventilate the shop floor, as it was already warm and would become stiflingly hot on this summer morning without a draught from outside. An exchange between the men was then overheard.

Perdovitch snarled at the foreman, "I should like to know why I should leave this place for you, you are all the cause of it."

Smiling, Franks replied, "You can bark as long as you like, I don't care"

Perdovitch got up from his bench and followed Franks towards the door. Then Sherr heard a groan and saw Franks fall to the ground. He and some other workers rushed over to help. Perdovitch, meanwhile, seemed to be backing away from the incident. There were about forty people on the shop floor at the time, but none of them had yet realised the gravity of what had just happened.

Nathan Lewis was on the spot: "I saw Hymie lean over Franks' shoulder as if to speak to him, but then suddenly he struck out twice with his left hand, aiming blows at Franks' head." At the time, Lewis believed that Perdovitch had merely punched the back of the foreman's neck with his fist. Another worker, Abraham Wand, heard the commotion at 8:45. He saw Franks lying face down on the floor with two bleeding wounds in the back of his neck.

As others gathered around the stricken Franks, Nathan Nelson heard a workmate ask Perdovitch what had just happened between them.

"It's all right, I've finished him. He deserved it, the bastard."

"Hymie, what have you done?"

"You can see what I've done. I am the injured man. You know how he treated me. I have done it and now I am waiting for the police like a man."

"Yes, but you shouldn't have hit him."

At this point Nelson ran off to fetch a doctor, and Perdovitch left the premises.

Ebenezer Everard Newbold, who ran a tobacconist shop round the corner at 79 Chapel Street, saw a police ambulance go past and pull up at Wilks around 9:00 am. Leaving his shop, he came across Perdovitch, whom he knew as a customer. "What's the matter, kid?"

"Oh, nothing worth talking about. The man was never any ____ good to anyone, so I've done him in." (When these words of his were quoted in court, the prisoner burst out laughing.)

Abraham Wand accompanied Franks, who was bleeding profusely, in the ambulance to Salford Royal Hospital, just over half a mile to the west along Chapel Street. Franks died of shock and blood loss before the ambulance reached the hospital.

Perdovitch, leaving Newbold, walked the short distance east to Salford Police Station on the corner of Chapel and Blackfriars Streets, entering at 8:58. On duty was Constable Samuel March.

Perdovitch asked him, "Do you want me?"

"What for?"

"That affair at Wilks. If you don't want me now, you soon will."

March, sensing that something was seriously amiss, cautioned Perdovitch and started to search him. Perdovitch then produced a small folding knife from his right-hand jacket pocket. When March opened it up, the blade had blood on it.

Perdovitch told him, "That's the thing I did it with."

Perdovitch was detained, and when news came from the hospital that Franks was dead, he was charged with murder.

On 16 August Perdovitch appeared at Salford Police Court for the coroner's inquest. Harry Franks of 253 Cheetham Hill Road, Solomon's younger brother, told the court that Franks lived at 146 Bellott Street, Hightown, and had left a wife and five children. On 19 August, the jury at the inquest delivered a verdict of wilful murder against Perdovitch. At a further hearing on 26 August, Dr. Jotindranath Ghosh, the resident surgical officer at Salford Royal Hospital, reported that Franks was dead on arrival at the hospital, though his two wounds were still bleeding. Dr. Ghosh was then asked about the condition of Franks' heart. Perdovitch, silent until then, blurted out, "He had no heart."

The trial at Manchester Assizes began on Friday 5 December 1919 under Mr. Justice McCardie. The prosecution was led by Mr. B.S. Wingate Saul, who argued that Perdovitch had brutally stabbed Franks to death in a cold, premeditated manner. He noted that Franks was "given an excellent name by the workpeople" at Wilks. Mrs. Franks, meanwhile, was now in delicate health and was at Blackpool with some of her children.

In defence, Mr. Joseph Lustgarten claimed that Perdovitch hadn't intended to kill Franks. And if, as it seemed, the latter had provoked the former beyond endurance over the course of a considerable period, this was a case of manslaughter rather than murder.

The prosecution called sixteen-year-old Rebecca Reuben of 10 Elsworth Street, Strangeways. Perdovitch had lodged with her family for seventeen years before he had joined the army in 1916, and continued to visit them after being demobbed and moving to Sedgley Park. He had last visited the Reubens at 9:00 am on 14 August, the day before the incident at Wilks. He'd given Rebecca half-a-crown to get chocolates, and some money to the other Reuben kids too, telling them he was going on his holidays.

"Where?"

"Strangeways."

The victim's wounds were described in court.

No. 1 was conical, one and three-quarters inches long (and deeper than the knife blade), one inch below and behind the lobe of the right ear. It had penetrated between the first and second vertebrae, dividing an artery and partially damaging the spinal cord.

No. 2 was in the middle of the back of the neck, one and a half inches long.

Considerable force must have been used to make such wounds. The cause of death was shock and hemorrhage.

Perdovitch had made a written statement in his defence. He'd had trouble with the heavy workload imposed on him by Franks and had decided to leave Wilks. Franks had seemed pleased by this news. On the day of the stabbing, Perdovitch found that the buckles on his machine had become clogged and decided to clean them with his knife. When Franks came by to open the door against the heat, Perdovitch struck him, unaware that the knife was still in his hand.

The jury retired for all of twenty minutes. They found Perdovitch guilty of murder, though they registered "a strong recommendation for mercy." The judge, donning a black cap, condemned the prisoner to death, though he stated that he would forward to the Home Secretary the jury's recommendation.

An appeal against the capital sentence was heard on 19 December 1919, but was dismissed as it was evident that the trial judge had gone out of his way to suggest to the jury every possible defence for Perdovitch's actions.

At dawn on Tuesday 6 January 1920, Hyman Perdovitch thanked the authorities at Strangeways Prison for the kindness they had shown him since his incarceration. And at 8:00 am that morning, he was hanged at Strangeways. A large crowd had gathered outside the prison to watch the notice of execution being pinned to the gate.

These are the bare bones of the case that the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* referred to as the "Salford Works Murder." It should be noted, however, that press reports of the case were not always very trustworthy when it came to details. The *Evening Chronicle*, for example, referred to Perdovitch as "a Russian named Ivan Pavlovitch, aged 34" who had perpetrated a fierce attack with tailor's shears on his foreman. Meanwhile the *Manchester Guardian*, no less, noted that "Ivan or Adolph" Perdovitch had stabbed Franks, and "both men were Russian Jews."

Let me add some flesh to these bones.

Vilna, Russia, Perdovitch's birthplace, is now Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Formerly in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and known for its climate of religious toleration, it was a centre of Jewish culture during much of the eighteenth century. But after Vilna came under Russian control in the 1790s, things changed for the worse. By the mid-nineteenth century as

many as 40% of the city's population was Jewish, but anti-Semitism was rife. And when Jews were blamed for the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, Vilna suffered three years of pogroms. It was the sort of place that Jews would escape from, if they had the means: to the United States, to South Africa, to England – and specifically to urban centres where large Jewish populations were already established. Such a city was Manchester: Solomon Franks and his wife Betsy were both born there, the former the son of a Russian-born Colonel who had emigrated to England in the mid-nineteenth century.

Perdovitch was evidently grateful to his adopted country, or he would not have volunteered to fight for it in 1916. But the action he saw during World War I would almost certainly have left him mentally, if not physically, scarred for life. The Royal Irish Regiment participated in the Third Battle of Ypres, better known as Passchendaele, a byword for senseless slaughter. Passchendaele on the Western Front was actually a series of battles between July and November 1917: Messines, Pilckem, Langemarck. There is no precise tally of the casualties during this campaign, though it's estimated that the Allies and Germans each had about 250,000 men killed or wounded. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes the Ypres Salient thus: "The explosion of millions of shells, accompanied by torrential rain, had turned the battlefield into an apocalyptic expanse – a swampy pulverized mire dotted with water-filled craters deep enough to drown a man, all made worse by the churned-up graves of soldiers killed in earlier fighting."

The jury's recommendation of clemency for Perdovitch may well have been based on their understanding that he had not only served his country, but suffered grievously for it. On the other hand, it was clear from the evidence that Perdovitch had intended to kill Franks, and that, with his military training and combat experience, he had known how to dispatch his victim efficiently using only a pocket knife.

In World War I, the deleterious mental effects of being subjected to mechanized warfare was called "shell shock"; now we call it PTSD. Its symptoms included headaches, dizziness, tremors, amnesia, poor concentration, tinnitus, hypersensitivity to noise, and a characteristic thousand-yard stare. Of its victims, war correspondent Philip Gibbs recalled: "They put on civilian clothes again and looked to their mothers and wives very much like the young men who had gone to business in the peaceful days before August 1914. But ... something had altered in them. They were subject to sudden moods, and queer tempers, fits of profound depression alternating with a restless desire for pleasure. Many were easily moved to passion where they lost control of themselves, many were bitter in their speech, violent in opinion, frightening." By 1917, shell shock was responsible for one-seventh of all discharges from the British army. As many as 10% of all British soldiers were afflicted by it, officers more than men. The best hope of recovery was for the sufferer to be sent home for complete rest.

A couple of similar cases provide some context to Perdovitch's actions, even if they do not excuse them.

The Case of Roy Joseph Hatty. Hatty, from Hamilton, Ontario, enlisted in 1916. On 6 November 1917 in Passchendaele he was buried alive following a shell explosion, then invalided to a hospital in Liverpool, England. He was unconscious for a month, and when he came to, suffered from insomnia, severe headaches, and tremors. He twitched continually, stuttered when he tried to speak, and preferred to stay buried under his bedsheets. He was attended by Kitty Jones, a trainee nurse, with whom he developed a friendship. Once he had sufficiently recovered there was talk of marriage, though Kitty's father expected him to get a job and Kitty to finish her training. Hatty, returning to Canada, attended a military hospital in Toronto, where he was diagnosed as suffering from "neurasthenia." He wrote to Kitty hoping to be reunited with her, but she replied with a Dear John letter. In July 1919 he returned to England and hung around the Liverpool hospital where Kitty worked, until he saw her on the steps outside, talking with another man. He shot her seven times, then turned himself into police, saying, "I have shot a nurse. I want you to arrest me." Hatty's death sentence was commuted to life in prison, but in January 1922 he hanged himself in his cell in Maidstone Prison.

The Case of Frederick Rothwell Holt. Lieutenant Frederick Rothwell Holt served on the Western Front with the 4th Loyal North Lancashire Regiment during World War I. He was invalided out of the army with shell shock and depression. On Christmas Eve 1919, the body of a young woman was found amongst the sand dunes in Lytham, Lancashire. The victim was 26-year-old Kathleen Breaks who had been shot and suffered numerous other wounds to her face and leg. Beside her corpse were a set of footprints, a pair of bloodied gloves, and a Webley service revolver belonging to Holt, who had been her lover. Apprehended, Holt claimed that the police had tried to kill him using mad dogs, germ-carrying flies, and gas. At his trial, the defence pleaded insanity as a result of shell shock, but the plea was rejected, the jury accepting the prosecution's theory that Holt had killed Kathleen to gain her life insurance. On 28 February 1920, a huge crowd assembled outside the Manchester Assize Court to hear the guilty verdict. Holt was hanged at Strangeways Prison on 13 April 1920.

After his trial Perdovitch would have been led through a tunnel from the Assize Court into adjacent Strangeways Prison to await execution. The scaffold was a permanent structure in a plain brick building with glass roof. After a very short walk from the condemned cell, the prisoner was led through an unmarked door and stepped onto a platform of two hinged leaves. The hangman, whose name was John Ellis, bound the prisoner with leather thongs. A noose hung from a beam above, while officials stood aside on another platform shut off from the drop by brass rail. "Everything is scrupulously clean, except for the handle of the lever, which apparently is never cleaned." The executioner then pulled the lever "and the man drops into the pit, to quiver with twitching feet after the dislocation of the neck." The procedure took about two minutes altogether.

The prison has brick walls reputed to be sixteen feet thick and a ventilation tower resembling a massive minaret that can be seen for miles. It is still referred to as “Strangeways,” though its official name is HMP Manchester. I wouldn’t be surprised if local children aren’t still warned by their parents not to misbehave or they’d “end up in Strangeways.” The Assize Court, a magnificent building designed, like the prison, by Alfred Waterhouse, was destroyed in the Manchester Blitz in 1940.

Solomon Franks was my great-grandfather. One of his four daughters was my paternal grandmother: Sylvia Franks, born 15 August 1898 at 6 Stanley Street, Manchester, only a ten-minute walk from Strangeways. She had a very long life, dying at the age of 97. For most of my youth I knew very little about the murder of her father. In fact, I knew little about her family at all, though my father at some point had let slip that, before he was born, his grandfather had been killed by a fellow worker with “a pair of scissors.” (I had wondered at the time how you could kill someone with scissors.) It was not until the early 1990s when, on my annual trip to Manchester, I paid a dutiful visit to my grandmother Sylvia who, widowed, was living alone in a prefabricated bungalow near Heaton Park. It was then that she told me the story of her father’s murder, and revealed that she had been working on the shop floor at Wilks when it happened.

Some years later, on another trip to Manchester, I visited the Local History Room at Manchester Central Library intending to find out more about my great-grandfather’s murder. I expected that after a century details would be difficult to obtain, but I was quite wrong. As well as many local newspaper reports, there were books with titles like *Murderous Manchester* that devoted a whole chapter to the Salford Works Murder. In one of its reports, the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* claimed that Franks “had a daughter also employed by Messrs. Wilks.” It was almost certainly right about that.

“Murder will out” is a potent axiom. It’s normally understood to mean that a murder leaves such a rip in the social fabric that it cannot be concealed indefinitely, that its perpetrator will eventually be brought to justice in this world or the next. But in my great-grandfather’s case, it also suggests to me that full acknowledgement of his murder, long suppressed or wilfully ignored by my elder relatives, would eventually have to be made. Although there was no doubt about the identity of the murderer, and justice (according to the standards of a century ago) had been served, the *effect* of the murder was long lasting. For I had come to understand that even I, three generations on, had grown up under its shadow.

Who first coined “Murder will out” is obscure, but the succinct phrase has been around a long time. Chaucer uses it twice in *The Canterbury Tales* (1400), and its appearance in “The Prioress’s Tale” is particularly interesting. The Prioress, a senior nun, tells her fellow pilgrims the tale of a pious seven-year-old Christian boy in a unnamed Asian city who was murdered by Jews for singing publicly in praise of the Virgin Mary. His body was cast into an obscure pit, but “Mordre

wol out, certeyn, it wol nat faille," asserts the Prioress. The boy, his throat cut, continues miraculously to sing until the Jews are brought to justice: they are pulled to pieces by wild horses and then hanged. At the end of her tale, to bring home the tear-jerking anti-Semitic message to her audience, the Prioress recalls the historical "yonge Hugh," supposedly murdered "a litel whyle ago" (actually in 1255, almost 150 years earlier) by Jews in Lincoln, England. The wave of anti-Semitism that followed the death of Hugh of Lincoln led to the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290. Hugh's case is now recognised as part of a larger "blood libel," in which Jews were falsely accused of indulging in human sacrifice. Regardless, Jews were not allowed back into England until 1657.

Anti-Semitism has been around for longer than Chaucer's Prioress, and for most practising Jews it is a constant trial that strengthens their faith. But in my father's family, after the murder of Solomon Franks, things played out quite differently. First, Franks had been murdered *by* a Jew for a motive that had little or nothing to do with anti-Semitism. (What was Perlovitch's motive? Resentment against someone he deemed an unworthy usurper of his authority, turbocharged by the madness of PTSD and the insecurity of a lonely immigrant, perhaps.) Second, Franks' murder was, let's face it, a cowardly, treacherous act: two vicious stabs from behind seeking the carotid artery of someone who had no reason to expect such violence (or he would never have turned his back on the Russian), and had probably done little more to provoke it than to smile when Perlovitch told him that he was quitting Wilks. And third, Jews, while accustomed to expect violence from *goyim*, were not supposed to kill other Jews.

The result was shame. Shame, that is, on the part of the surviving Franks family, that their father should have been the victim of a co-religionist. But not only shame: suspicion of their fellow Jews, the belief that they could not be trusted, that they might suddenly stab you in the back. Such an attitude was, ironically, a twisted form of anti-Semitism, and yet it pervaded my father's family.

But the immediate effect of the murder was economic. (I'm reading between the lines now, as shame all but silenced my father's family on this issue.) The widow Betsy and the Franks children, suddenly deprived of their breadwinner, were plunged not only into grief and shame, but also into financial insecurity. Betsy found herself keeping shop. Her unmarried daughters needed to be taken off her hands as quickly as possible. Sylvia, the daughter who'd been at Wilks on that fateful August morning, was married off to Rufus Ruddick, son of an illiterate slipper maker, on 27 October 1920. It was almost certainly not a love match. My father was born on 11 August 1921, just two years after the murder.

My father, who lived until he was 91, was a prey all his life to low self-esteem, social anxiety, and depression. As he got older, his psychic defenses weakened, and he would put his emotional problems down to the fact that his mother never loved him. This probably wasn't true. In an old Ruddick family photo album there's a postcard, dated 10 August 1925, addressed

to my father in the Children's Ward at St. Mary's Hospital for some unstated ailment: "To our dear little son in remembrance of his fourth birthday. With all our love, from Mamma & Dadda. P.S. we are coming to bring you home on Saturday."

We saw Sylvia and Rufus rarely during my childhood, though they lived little more than a mile away. But while we inhabited a detached residence in leafy Broughton Park, they lived in a terraced house in Cluny Street, Cheetham Hill, and worked in a factory. My mother never accompanied us on our infrequent visits to the lower orders. The brick terraces, and Cluny Street itself, were swept away by slum clearance bulldozers some time in the late 1960s.

In that same old family photograph album, there are several pictures of my grandmother, dated 1916 and signed with some variety of the phrase, "Yours always, Sylvia." They show a smiling, statuesque, confident young woman wearing a variety of fancy hats. I remember Grandma Sylvia as remote, grim-faced, all too evidently putting up with her lowly lot in life. It wasn't until after that visit to her many years later that I began to understand just what she had had to endure.