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"Death of a Jewish Radical" event explores unsolved 1922 Erie murder.

By Jordana Rosenfeld



Photo: Courtesy of Battle of Homestead Foundation

Herman Martius in front of his store in Erie

On April 5, 1922, a postman in Erie., Pa. discovered the lifeless body of Polish Jewish immigrant Herman Martius at his dry goods store on W. 18th Street. Martius' head had been bashed in, perhaps by an ax. The store had been ransacked. The police investigated and discarded several possible explanations, including mariticide, a robbery gone wrong, and insurance fraud. One hundred years later, Martius' murder has not been solved.

Kipp Dawson, Martius' granddaughter, believes that the circumstances of her grandfather's murder and the subsequent fruitless police investigation may have had to do with his radical politics. Dawson suggests that as a member of the Friends of Soviet Russia, Martius may have been the victim of Red Scare tactics by law enforcement or a target of the local Ku Klux Klan.

Dawson, a retired Pittsburgh Public Schools teacher and former Washington County coal miner,

has spent years researching Martius' life and death and will present her work at a free virtual event sponsored by the Battle of Homestead Foundation at 7:30 p.m. on Thu., May 19.

Dawson will be joined by labor historian Lou Martin to discuss their research on the crime and investigation, as well as the community aftermath of a murder that they say symbolizes the civic and social turmoil besetting American democracy in the 1920s.

"You can view history as a spiral," says Dawson. "It repeats itself and at times appears to be going backwards, but is ultimately moving forward. However, as we see every day in our current political controversies, there is still so much that can be learned from the past."