

***“The Jews are on the Side of Liquor and Always Have”*: Attitudes, Anxieties, and Responses to Jewish Bootlegging during the Prohibition Era in Canada.**

By Tommy Herman

“The Jews are on the side of liquor and always have,” quipped the iconic American anti-Semite, automobile pioneer and industrialist, Henry Ford, in 1922.¹ As is widely known, Ford published a four-volume set of anti-Semitic books, entitled, “The International Jew,” serialized in his newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*. In chapter 64 of Volume 4 of this collection, entitled, “The Jewish Element in Bootlegging Evil,” Ford opined that prior to Prohibition, Jews had produced and distributed counterfeit wine and spirits with the intention of poisoning America, for their own profit and gain. He outlined a conspiracy in which American Jews deliberately sought out to enact prohibition legislation, in order to maximize their monetary gains and influence, resulting in a dramatic increase in the value of alcohol as a commodity. In 1922, after his collection was published, his perverse comments represented the views and mindset of many individuals throughout North America.

Yet, it is no secret in the history of North American Jewry that some individuals participated in both the legal and illegal production of alcoholic beverages. While both Canada and the United States introduced laws prohibiting the manufacturing and sale of alcoholic beverages, the Jewish community was often singled-out and wrongfully accused of illegally producing and distributing alcohol, in a practice known as ‘bootlegging’. The gentile community of Canada’s overall perceptions of Jews as bootleggers caused significant social anxieties among Jews, and placed them in a

¹ Henry Ford, “The International Jew, Volume 4” (Michigan: The Dearborn Publishing Company, 1922)

defensive position. Compelled to address such unfavorable views, Canadian Jews adopted a range of reputation protection strategies both inside and outside of the Jewish community. From an outside position, various Jews throughout Canada directly responded to accusations of heavy Jewish involvement in bootlegging during the prohibition era, through various media, newspapers chief among them. These anxieties facilitated internal conflict and response within the Jewish community, as Jews were forced to decide whether their fellow Jews who did, in fact, participate in bootlegging, should be accepted within the larger Canadian Jewish community. This conflict was reflected in the controversy concerning the Jewish-Orthodox burial of Canada's "Bootlegging Queen," Bessie-Starkman Perri as many Jews residing in the Hamilton, Ontario region, strongly opposed her interment based on her notoriety and ignoring the fact that up to her death, she was still a practicing Orthodox Jew.

When reviewing the historical connections between Jews and the alcohol industry, historian Marni Davis notes in her book, *Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition*, that Jews' relationship with alcohol stems back to the foundations of Rabbinic Jewish law. According to Davis, "Jews are linked to alcohol production and consumption by the dietary regulations of kashrut, which requires Jews to use wine in their religious rituals and forbid consumption of wine produced or even handled by non-Jews."² Due to their strict dietary laws, Jews needed to monitor all areas of alcohol production, from the acquisition of suitable ingredients to the actual distillation and eventual packaging. While in the context of Davis' point, alcohol production and consumption was purely religious, Jews were able to incorporate their skills in this

² Marni Davis, "*Jews and Booze: Becoming American In The Age Of Prohibition*". (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

practice into business and promote their cultural, upward mobility. While 19th century European Jews were subject to flagrant episodes of anti-Semitism and violent pogroms, alcohol was a way of merging Jews within the hostile gentile society, as there was a need for alcohol, to which Jews were there to provide. Jews were also able to use their strong analytic and business skill as well as cultural practices, to produce and distribute alcoholic beverages, a business like any other. Davis references several examples of Jewish individuals who transferred their knowledge and skill relating to alcohol production and distribution from Europe to the U.S and were able to provide a comfortable living for themselves. However, more important was the societal effect of alcohol on Judaism.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Jewish activity within the alcohol industry was a means of assimilation, as alcohol was considered a necessity for many, thereby permitting a window of opportunity for Jews to gain acceptance within the larger, Gentile community. By the early 20th century, anti-alcohol sentiment became more and more widespread and deemed ‘un-American’ and as a result, Jews were deemed ‘un-American’ as well. As Davis notes, “By 1920, when the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect, the political stance and entrepreneurial choice Jews had embraced for decades became a mark of marginality and a source of shame. Jews’ economic practices and cultural attitudes now came into direct conflict with the nation’s prevailing moral and political ideals, and with American law as well.”³ So when Jews were labeled as ‘un-American,’ further anti-Semitic tendencies developed, which led to greater hostility against Jews.

³ Ibid, 2

During this period, there were various ways in which Jews participated in the illegal alcohol industry. There were small-time saloon or speakeasy keepers, who often operated their businesses within a house or basement. There were also the wealthy businessmen who produced alcohol such as Samuel Bronfman, the owner of Seagrams, one of the leading whiskey companies in the world and who had profited greatly from alcohol demand during Prohibition. Finally, there was the bootlegger, an individual or organization specializing in the illegal distribution of alcohol. While Jewish involvement in bootlegging in Canada may not have been as widespread as it was in the U.S., a handful of Canadian Jews played a key role in this industry. Jewish bootlegging resulted in the increase of anti-Jewish hostilities in Canada, as antisemites were now able to justify Jewish hostility, by blaming Jews for the illegal alcohol industry *in toto*.

Because of the sacred religious context to Jewish involvement in alcohol production, the Jewish community of Canada did have some latitude when it came to alcohol production and possession, under what was labeled, 'Statutory Prohibition'. The laws under Statutory Prohibition allowed exemptions for religious groups that expressed the necessity of alcohol for legitimate ceremonial purposes. As a result, the Jewish community was granted an exemption to produce, obtain and possess wine during the sabbath and other religious holidays. However, in a world where anti-Semitism was tolerated, it is not difficult to imagine the uproar which this exemption or entitlement (depending on who you ask) caused within the Gentile community, still precluded from alcohol use, as well as the bewilderment over the necessity for kosher wine. One article published on November 7, 1919 in *The Globe and Mail*, entitled: "Fines Lindsay Jew For Having Wine – Toronto Rabbi Testifies For Its Necessity For Religious Purposes,"

clearly displayed some of the social conflict that Statutory Prohibition caused within Canada. The article described an event in which a Jew (as referred to in the article), named Applebaum, had been arrested in Lindsay, Ontario for possession of homemade wine, which he claimed was for religious purposes and a necessity in the Jewish community. As the author explained: “If a Jew was poor and could not buy wine he must sell even his garment to secure it. Substitutes were not proper, not even watered wine unless it was impossible to get pure wine.”⁴ This is a very interesting analogy, as it rightfully summarizes the religious importance of proper wine for Jewish rituals and ceremonies, while also displaying a troublesome negotiation within the Jewish community, as it was risking further alienation, anti-Semitism and prosecution because of this important necessity. A Toronto Rabbi defended Applebaum in court, as noted in the article, “Rabbi Jacob Gordon of Toronto testified that according to the law of Moses, which was the law of the Jews, good Hebrews had to have “old pure” wine for sanctification purposes on Saturdays and Sundays, especially during the Passover.”⁵ The article described Applebaum’s defense counsel’s arguments, stating, “Counsel for the defense said he could not see why Applebaum should be singled out for prosecution any more than any person of another religion might be singled out for partaking of sacramental wine.”⁶ Even the assigned prosecutor conceded that he did believe the defendant and that he did not intentionally break the law. However, the judge ruled that while he sympathized with Applebaum, what he committed was ‘explicit’ and as a result,

⁴ Special Dispatch to The Globe, “Fines Lindsay Jew For Having Wine – Toronto Rabbi Testifies For Its Necessity For Religious Purposes.” *The Globe and Mail*, November 7, 1919. Pg. 2. Found on The Globe and Mail archive database.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

he was fined \$200.00. While it appears in the case of Applebaum, the possession of sacramental wine, under the rules and regulations of Statutory Prohibition were genuine, these regulations proved to be incredibly impactful in societal reflections of Jews all across North America during the Prohibition era.

Yet it would be untrue to suggest that no Jew took advantage of this exemption in order to partake in the bootlegging industry. Marni Davis expands on this thought in *Jews and Booze*, stating; “The special dispensation granted by Prohibition regulation that gave American Jews access to sacramental wine for religious purposes, and established procedures by which Jews could buy and sell it, emerged early in the Prohibition era as a massive breach through which hundreds of thousands of illegal alcohol flowed. The fact that Jewish alcohol production, purveyance, and consumption was actually built into federal Prohibition law had a profound effect on Jewish attitudes toward Prohibition, and on prohibitionists’ attitudes toward Jews.”⁷ As a result of Jews using Statutory Prohibition to illegally produce and distribute alcohol, prejudicial attitudes towards them were justified by the Gentile community and continued to persist over time. In response to statements made by Rev. Roy Buchanan in *The Globe and Mail* in the fall of 1926, Rev. William Matheson made the case against Statutory Prohibition for religious groups, specifically, the Jewish community. Matheson argued that, “statutory prohibition defers to the religious conscience of the Jews. Under it he is expressly allowed beverage as appointed in the Scriptures of the O.T. The beverage is intoxicating.”⁸ Intriguingly, Matheson’s notion that the exemption “defers to the religious conscience of the Jews,”

⁷ Marni Davis, “*Jews And Boozes: Becoming American In The Age Of Prohibition*”. (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

⁸ William Matheson, “The Bible And Prohibition.” *The Globe and Mail*, November 1, 1926. Pg. 4. Found on The Globe and Mail archive database.

implied that it is the conniving nature of the Jews that they use Statutory Prohibition for their possession of alcohol. His published comments were among many examples of Jews under attack, ridiculed as Bootleggers and ‘cheap’ alcoholic drinkers, who took unfair advantage of their protection and entitlement under the laws of Statutory Prohibition. In “Jews and Booze”, Marni Davis makes reference to the efforts undertaken by several American Rabbis to prevent Jewish stereotypes, which came about, as a result of Statutory Prohibition laws in the U.S, under Section 6 of the “Volstead Act”. Moreover, Davis states, “Jewish leaders feared that section 6 would create opportunities too tempting to forego. By working with prohibition officials, they hoped to keep Jews within the law – not only out of a sense of community responsibility, but also to protect Jews in general from any anti-Semitism incurred by the criminality of a few”⁹. Clearly, Jewish officials were not naïve, as they knew, full well that some would take advantage of the exemption under Statutory Prohibition.

By the time prohibition in Canada took effect, Jews had already well established themselves throughout the world, as successful practitioners of alcohol production and as bootlegging began to develop in Canada, the Jewish community, as a whole, was held responsible for it. While groups of Canadian Jews fought against these stereotypes, it did not help their cause that prominent figures of power and influence in Canada, were contributing to this wave of prejudice against Jews. For example, in January 1922, the Police Commissioner of Winnipeg, Colonel J.G. Rattray, delivered a speech at a Lions Club luncheon, during which he made several harsh remarks about Jews and several other racial groups. The event, reported on by the *Manitoba Free Press* in an article published

⁹ Marni Davis, “*Jews And Boozes: Becoming American In The Age Of Prohibition*”. (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

on January 6, 1922, entitled; “Police Commissioner On Law Enforcement – Col. Rattray Condemns Sinister Combination of Races,” noted Rattray’s assessment that several racial groups, including the Jews, Japanese and Prussians, were working against “the forces of right,” claiming that 95% of the Bootleggers in Manitoba were Jewish.¹⁰ Rattray’s inflammatory remarks at this event caused considerable controversy within Manitoba’s Jewish community, prompting the formal Jewish Committee of Manitoba, to issue an angry response to the Commissioner’s comments, in a letter published in the *Free Press* on January 12, 1922. The article, entitled; “Reply To Colonel Rattray By Jewish Community – Characterizes Statements Before Lions Club As Amazing and Untrue,” was written by Rabbi Samuels, who seriously reprimanded the Commissioner for his bigoted comments. The letter begins with Samuels writing:

The amazing statements with regard to the Jewish people made by Col. Rattray last week before the Lions club, makes one wonder whether he is the sorry victim of a wicked hoax, or whether he has seriously joined forces with these professional Jew-baiters for whom no accusation is too absurd and no calumny too fiendish so long as it is calculated to inflict misery and suffering on the Jewish race.¹¹

Rabbi Samuels continued, noting “[n]o protest can be too vigorous against the attempt to revive the outrageous practice of penalizing the Jews collectively, for the wrongdoings of some individual members of the race.”¹² The Rabbi’s quote outlined the injustice facing the entire Jewish community in which, many Jews were blamed for the wrongdoing of a

¹⁰ Staff Correspondence of the Free Press, “Police Commissioner On Law Enforcement.” *Manitoba Free Press*, January 6, 1922. Pg. 9. Document provided by the Manitoba Historic Resources Branch.

¹¹ Rabbi Samuels, “Reply To Col. Rattray By Jewish Committee.” *Manitoba Free Press*, January 12, 1922. Pg. 12. Document provided by the Manitoba Historic Resources Branch.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

few. As for the claim that “95% of Bootleggers in Manitoba were Jewish”, Rabbi Samuels directed a counter-accusation against the Police Commission as well as the entire law enforcement department of the Province:

Now Col. Rattray has asserted that 95 per cent of the bootleggers in Manitoba are Jews. He knows that (this) is as far from the truth as any of his other statements and interpretations of the law. But even if a noticeable percentage (which yet remains to be proved) of Jews by race, who, demoralized by the corrupt and brutal police administration of other lands (this is on the authority of Prof, A. V. Dicey, M.A. I.L.D, K.C, one of England’s greatest jurists) are encouraged to cater to the privilege to buy whiskey sanctioned by Manitoba’s law enforcement officer(s) for members of the Lions club, is that any reason for exposing indignation and perhaps outrage, a whole community?¹³

Rabbi Samuels blatantly denounced the Police Commissioner and those officials under his command, and accused them of contradicting themselves by permitting the purchase, possession and consumption of alcohol at the very Club in which he presented his offensive speech. He concluded his response by stating, “The Jewish community is loyal to the law and constitution in every land. During the 2,050 years referred to by Col. Rattray the Jews have unceasingly been victimized almost beyond human endurance, and the fact that they still have to contend with a hatred deliberately fostered by scoundrel fabricators is the real conspiracy against civilization.”¹⁴ This remark accurately represents the feeling of angst amongst many Jews in Canada, as Rabbi Samuels characterized the misperceptions against Jews as a form of victimization and also stresses the obligation to fight against unfounded Jewish conspiracies, something which, as he states, had been prevalent for thousands of years. The critical element of this public sparring between Winnipeg’s police commissioner and one of the city’s prominent rabbis, is the extent to

¹³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

which the powers that provoked such ugly anti-Jewish sentiment, unfairly ostracized Jews as criminals and undesirables – Rattray, after all, was a public official speaking as a public officer.

By the mid-1920's several Provinces had successfully repealed Prohibition, allowing for the sale and possession of alcohol, which included Manitoba. While the misperception against Jews and Bootlegging may not have been relevant any longer in Winnipeg, by 1923 Prohibition was still going strong throughout Ontario, which led to an increase in anti-Semitism there. To illustrate, on May 10, 1923, *The Globe and Mail* published an editorial entitled "*Bootleggers And The Jews*", which opened with a description of an accident that had occurred in Toronto, Ontario, where a Jewish woman had been struck and dragged over 80 feet by a car being driven by a drunk driver on Dundas Street. The driver caused further destruction, by crashing his car into a pole and destroying the outside of a local shop; the woman later died of her injuries. The editorial explained that prior to the accident, the driver of the car had been out drinking at a 'speakeasy' located on D'Arcy Street, a street in the heart of the Jewish district of Toronto. "It cannot be denied," the writer felt the need to point out to his readers, "that much of the bootlegging traffic is in the Jewish hands." Transforming the story from a drunk-driving tragedy focused on either the Jewish victim of the accident or the presumably-gentile driver to the industry of alcohol behind the story itself, the author continued:

The fact, attested almost daily in the courts, should spur the Jewish religious, business and community leaders into vigorous action. Jews who are engaged or financially interested in the illicit drink trade are a small minority of the Jewish colony, but the law-abiding members should be sensitive to the reproach thrown upon their race by the law-breaking few. If moral suasion will not suffice stronger measures should be taken. Jews who are good Canadians should feel it a duty to help the authorities to suppress the criminal element. They cannot afford to regard

it as a matter for the public alone. If they do not realize their responsibility they will be confronted by a public opinion that will affect the whole Jewish community adversely.¹⁵

The *Globe* editorialist held the Jewish community, as a whole, accountable for those illicit actions of a handful of allegedly Jewish bootleggers and it is important to note that while the writer did explain that this illegal activity was only perpetuated by a small minority, the notion of greater Jewish participation and complicity was still prevalent, only adding to the already prejudicial environment, which Jews were forced to endure in Canada. The undertone of the quote, however, is equally critical, as the author essentially conveyed the idea that if the Jewish community did not make efforts to put a stop to Jews involved in Bootlegging, the community, as a whole, would be guilty through association.

It is understandable why the Jewish community would carry a deep sense of anxiety and feel compelled to counter such notions attributable to them. It took only five days after the *Globe* editorial was published, for a Toronto Jewish man, Edmund Scheuer, to respond to this public decree of blame, published in *The Globe and Mail*. Entitling his address, “*In Defense Of The Jews*,” Scheuer commenced by expressing his shock after reading the inflammatory piece, as he had been a regular reader of *The Globe and Mail*

¹⁵ Unknown Author, “Bootleggers And The Jews.” *The Globe and Mail*, May 10, 1923. Pg. 4. Found on The Globe and Mail archive database.

for over fifty years, during which he was, “accustomed to its at all times impartial of racial and religious questions.”¹⁶ Scheuer proceeded to express the following:

Taking the Jewish population of Toronto at a rough estimate as being composed of eight thousand families, and admitting that unfortunately a comparatively large percentage of those engaged in the illicit liquor traffic are Jews, the offenders likely form not over one and one-half percent of the entire Jewish population. While appreciating the tribute of “law abiding citizens” you so kindly bestow on the remaining ninety-eight and one-half percent, your article, nevertheless, does them a palpable injustice, by the identification of the Jews with bootlegging.¹⁷

Similar to Rabbi Samuels’ comments from one year earlier, Scheuer described how the original article attributed the blame of a few Jews, who may or may not have been involved in the bootlegging industry in Toronto, onto the wider Jewish community and related the serious offense of involuntary manslaughter, in connection with the aforementioned fatal car accident. Scheuer emphasized the blame, which was cast upon the Jews, by referencing the Shakespearian character of “Shylock” noting, that “one Jew unsure brought and brings today the name of Shylock on all Jews.”¹⁸ Scheuer relies on this disreputable character to demonstrate how he contributed to an adverse stereotype of Jews, not unlike the editorial, which *The Globe And Mail* had published, which also enforced a notion of rejection and isolation on part of the wider, Gentile community, towards Jews in Canada. Scheuer also brings a satirical approach to his response, stating, “A reprobate who bears a Jewish sounding name sets fire to his premises, and we all, at

¹⁶ Edmund Scheuer, “In Defense Of The Jews.” *The Globe and Mail*, May 15, 1923. Pg 4. Found on The Globe and Mail archive database.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Shylock was the notorious character in Shakespeare’s play, in which he attempts murder and, as a result, is ordered to convert to Christianity. Ibid., 16.

once, become incendiaries, and fire insurance is refused to us.”¹⁹ or, “Trotsky - an apostle - the whole world knows how little of a Jew he is - is still called a Jew. Trotsky the Jew is a Bolshevist; hence all Jews must be Bolshevists!”²⁰

As Scheuer proceeded in his editorial, he also acknowledged the religious differences between Jews and non-Jews and how these differences not only separated Jews within the wider Gentile community, but also how it affected Jewish contribution to the bootlegging industry. Scheuer noted, “The Jews have no hierarchical synagogal organization which can throw the fear of God into the hearts of these contemptible bootleggers.”²¹ In Judaism, there is no institutional body or singular rabbinical authority that governs the actions of Jews, which includes occupational choices and economics. However, the Catholic Church is structured differently, as the Pope acts as its singular leader, who is regarded by many as ‘God on Earth’. Aside from Hassidic Jewish communities, rabbis do not possess the same power and authority over the wider Jewish community, resulting in a lack of moral suasion that would normally preclude individuals from breaking the law. This particular idea is expanded upon by Davis, who, speaking on this within a U.S. context, noted, “Congressman Volstead, Commissioner Roper, and, it seems, the Reform Jews of the CCAR had failed to take the nonstructured, nonhierarchical nature of traditional Jewish rabbinic ordination into account. Compared to Christian religious institutions, the American rabbinate was loosely organized and minimally supervised. No bureaucracy existed that could be given the task of overseeing

¹⁹ Ibid., 16.

²⁰ Ibid., 16.

²¹ Ibid., 16.

and regulating how kosher wine was being dispensed or used.”²² In our Toronto case, Scheuer is attracting attention to the few Jewish Bootleggers, who have brought notoriety to the wider Jewish community, which both Scheuer and Rabbi Samuels were attempting to fight. The original *Globe And Mail* editorial, also suggested that the Jewish community needed to better govern its own, by confronting and preventing the actions of ‘Jewish Bootleggers’, instead of relying on the local authorities. Scheuer addresses this suggestion, by noting, that for the few Jewish bootleggers who participated in this industry, it was highly doubtful that authorities would be incapable of enforcing the law against them, instead of depending on a satirical “Jewish Ku Klux Klan” or “Jewish Secret Service”, both referenced by Scheuer.²³ Scheuer’s response however, further rejected the separatist notions put forth in the editorial, and suggests it is the responsibility of the Jewish community to prevent Jews from participating in bootlegging.

While it is clearly evident that there was a strong stigma against the Jewish community, in connection with bootlegging by the predominant, gentile Canadian society, this alienation transferred within the Jewish community as well. In the case of Canadian-Jewish individuals who actually participated in the bootlegging industry, there was considerable controversy surrounding their acceptance within the Canadian-Jewish community, as reflected in the case of Canada’s “Bootlegging Queen” - Bessie Starkman-Perri. On August 13th, 1930, Bessie Starkman-Perri, the Jewish wife and business partner of Italian-Canadian Bootlegger, Rocco Perri, was gunned down while exiting her car.

²² Marni Davis, “*Jews And Booze: Becoming American In The Age Of Prohibition*”. (New York: New York Marketing Press, 2012).

²³ Edmund Scheuer, “In Defense Of The Jews.” *The Globe and Mail*, May 15, 1923. Pg 4. Found on The Globe and Mail archive database.

During the prohibition era, Rocco Perri had been the face of the large-scale bootlegging industry in Canada, as well as being one of the top Canadian-Whiskey importers in the United States. However, while Rocco was known as “The King of Bootleggers” in Canada, it is widely believed that his wife, Bessie Starkman was, in reality, the brains of Rocco’s entire operation. Like many members of Canada’s Jewish population at this time, Bessie Starkman (born Besha Starkman), immigrated to Canada with her family in 1900 from Russian Poland, and the family resided in Toronto’s “Ward” area, which was the centre of Toronto’s Jewish Community during the early 20th century. She would go on to marry Harry Tobin, a Russian Jew with whom, they raised two daughters and operated a boarding house on Chestnut Street in Toronto. It was at this boarding house, in 1922, that Rocco Perri arrived, seeking for a place to rent. Perri had immigrated to Canada from Italy, and turned to a life of crime, as he established connections with influential Mafia leaders in both Canada and the U.S. However, both Starkman and Perri dreamed of power and riches, and knew that in order to realize this dream, they would have to be prepared to break the law. After remaining in the Tobin’s boarding house for three months, Perri, together with Starkman ran off together and re-located to Hamilton, Ontario, where they eventually established themselves as the “King and Queen” of bootleggers in Canada.

On the evening of Starkman’s death, the Perri’s had arrived home at 11:35pm, and immediately upon exiting their car parked in their garage, were ambushed by several men. Rocco Perri managed to flee the garage to safety, but his wife was shot mercilessly over one hundred times, although she was likely killed instantly from only the second shotgun blast. As observed through the wave of newspaper reports in the aftermath,

Rocco Perri intended from the beginning to bury his wife in a traditional Orthodox Jewish ceremony. As James Dubro explains in his book, *King of The Mob: Rocco Perri And The Women Who Ran His Rackets*, “it was Starkman’s alleged betrayal of Judaism, by abandoning her family and religion for the Italian, non-Jewish, Rocco Perri, which caused the controversy surrounding her burial.”²⁴ Privately, Starkman identified as a Jew and continued to raise her two daughters in the Jewish tradition. Moreover, in the days leading up to Starkman’s funeral, almost all of the Synagogues and Rabbis, who were approached to conduct the burial service, declined to participate. Starkman had been accused of religious betrayal by the Jewish community of Hamilton, as she developed a relationship with the Italian, but most importantly, non-Jewish, Perri. However, after examining several articles from different publications, which had reported on this event, it is understandable that the conflict surrounding Starkman’s interment was not because of her supposed abandonment of Judaism, but rather her notorious reputation as a top bootlegger. For instance, an article was published on August 16, 1930, one day prior to her funeral, by the *Toronto Daily Star*, in which Rabbi S. Levine of the local Ohev Zedek Congregation, adamantly stressed that no burial service would take place and was quoted as stating: “I do not want to be mixed up in this whatever. I do not want my name associated with it. I am not going to be there.”²⁵ While Rabbi Levine did not explicitly provide his reasons in support of his decision, he hinted at the shame, he thought Starkman had brought upon the local Jewish community of Hamilton. Interestingly, one

²⁴ James Dubro, *King Of The Mob: Rocco Perri And The Women Who Ran His Rackets*. (Markham: Viking, 1987).

²⁵ Staff Correspondence of The Star, “Perri Kept Faith With Daughters.” *Toronto Daily Star*, August 16, 1930. Pg. 2. Found on the Toronto Star archive database.

could look to the translation of “Ohev Zedeck”, to understand Rabbi Levine’s comments, as this Hebrew phrase translates to “Lovers Of Justice” in the English language. In the case of Bessie Starkman, this translation is ironic, as it accurately describes the conflict concerning burial. As a result, officials from Ohev Zedeck had to determine whether Starkman’s commitment to the Jewish faith, overrode her objectionable reputation and negative image, which she would impose upon the larger Jewish community of Hamilton. Furthermore, the phrase “Lovers Of Justice” exemplifies both a religious and societal-judicial conflict, as each side manifests a different perception upon the Jews - one from God and the other from Canadian society. In the end, however, Ohev Zedeck agreed to hold the burial service, choosing Starkman’s religious identity and observance, over her notoriety.

While Ohev Zedeck did agree to bury Starkman, it is evident that the congregation was not happy about this choice. On August 18, 1930, the Monday following Starkman’s funeral, *The Globe and Mail* published a scathing report of the funeral, entitled, “Panic Threatened And Blow Struck At Perri Funeral - Sensation-Seekers Mill About Grave Of Murdered Woman -THOUSANDS WATCH RITES - Street and Highway Crowded With Carloads of Spectators”. In this article, the author clearly referenced the disdain that the congregation felt for Starkman, noting,

Unwanted. It is a rude, unlovely spot, with little of peace and rest about it. Yet, so friends say, they had a difficult time or it to have Mrs. Perri buried there, Severed from her people and the synagogue since she had been Perri’s common-law wife, they had no desire to take her back, even in death. At one Jewish cemetery she was refused interment. At another, a consideration was asked, so friends said, but it was prohibitive. Finally, officials of Ohev Zedeck consented, provided \$2,000 was paid. This was done. ‘But they dug her grave

on the edge close to the fence and that is an insult’, so Jews said this afternoon.²⁶

One interesting detail, which I discovered during my research, was the perceived shame that this funeral brought to the local Jewish community of Hamilton, Ontario. When I refer to the phrase, ‘perceived shame’, I mean that various publications documenting this event, wrote about the negative image which it brought upon the Jewish community of Hamilton, almost sympathetically, and how the burial of a notorious Jewish bootlegger violated expected norms within the Jewish community. To illustrate and not unlike *The Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Daily Star* published a re-cap of Starkman’s funeral, entitled, “Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All Of Morbid Curiosity”. From this title alone, the image of Jewish funeral rites, as a place of sacred burial ground, is significantly undermined by its presentation as a disturbing and unpleasant locale. This article also describes the large crowds of on-lookers, which this event attracted, that were estimated between 10,000 – 15,000 people, who essentially defiled the cemetery, as graves were trampled and one fence was taken down.²⁷

These historical accounts are critical when properly evaluating the relationship between the Jewish community and the predominant, Gentile society of Canada, during the prohibition era. As demonstrated through the various articles and editorials, it is apparent that societal perceptions in Canada towards Jews, as bootleggers, caused both widespread anxiety and animosity throughout Canada’s Jewish population, both inward and outward. In understanding the importance of this conflict, one need only refer to this

²⁶ Staff Correspondence of The Globe. “Panic Threatened And Blow Struck At Perri Funeral - Sensation-Seekers Mill About Grave Of Murdered Woman -THOUSANDS WATCH RITES - Street and Highway Crowded With Carloads of Spectators.” *The Globe and Mail*, August 18, 1930. Pg. 1. Found on The Globe and Mail archive database.

²⁷ Staff Correspondence of The Star. “Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All Of Morbid Curiosity.” *The Toronto Daily Star*, August 18, 1930. Pg. 2. Found on the Toronto Star archive database.

era in Canadian history, within the last 100 years. Moreover, this places the conflict between the wider Gentile society and Canada's Jewish community in a relatively contemporary context, offering a thought-provoking view of Jewish struggles in North America during the early 20th century, to which one might find it very revealing to learn of the isolation and public shaming Canadian Jews were subjected, due to bootlegging and Jewish measures undertaken to oppose egregious stereotypes. Similarly, it is interesting to view the inward responses to the many criticisms against Jews. This is clearly apparent in the controversy surrounding the death of Canada's "Bootlegging Queen", Bessie Starkman-Perri. Because of her occupation and notoriety, Perri caused conflict within Hamilton, Ontario's Jewish community, as Jewish officials needed to decide whether her Orthodox-Jewish identity outweighed her notoriety. Furthermore, the controversy and backlash of her burial, can be seen as having provoked further negative perceptions against Jews within the Gentile community of Canada, while also contributing to the already established social anxieties felt within Canada's Jewish community.