

“Under the Reign of the Underworld:” Montreal’s Jewish Gangsters of the 1920s & 1930s

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“Montreal Under the Reign of the Underworld” headlined a series of newspaper articles condemning the most notorious Jewish crime bosses in the late 1920s and 1930s.¹ Montreal newspapers regularly denounced the criminal exploits of Jewish gangsters following the Prohibition era in Canada. Canada’s Prohibition laws made criminal groups enormously successful by illegally exporting Canadian liquor into the United States. Although Prohibition laws varied across Canada, Quebec was one of the only provinces that opposed the nationwide ban on alcohol, which allowed bootlegging businesses to infiltrate Montreal’s criminal underworld and fuel the insatiable thirst of the 1920s. Quebec’s refusal to enforce strict liquor laws shaped Montreal’s reputation as a “wide-open town, uniquely sinful in strait-laced Canada.”² During the Prohibition period, Montreal was widely perceived as the city for good times, providing refuge for those seeking relief from the strictures of temperance. When the Canadian government eventually repealed Prohibition, “the sinfulness of Montreal was already legendary across Canada.”³ Meanwhile, the Jewish gangsters who took advantage of the underground liquor trade shifted their operations into illegal gambling dens. By the late 1920s, for instance, Montreal was already “studded with establishments that offered horse betting, sports betting, roulette, blackjack, chemin de fer, baccarat, craps, and, of course, barbotte, the hugely popular dice game unique to Montreal.”⁴

¹ Denys Chouinard, “Fifty years ago, a turning point in municipal political life: the Caron Inquiry, 1950-1954,” *Archives de Montréal*, September 16, 2004. [Fifty Years Ago, A Turning Point in Municipal Political Life: The Caron Inquiry, 1950-1954 | Archives of Montreal \(archivesdemontreal.com\)](https://www.archivesdemontreal.com/en/fifty-years-ago-a-turning-point-in-municipal-political-life-the-caron-inquiry-1950-1954)

² William Weintraub, “Wide-Open Town: Girls, Gambling, Graft,” in *City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and '50s* (Toronto: M & S, 1996), 61.

³ Weintraub, *City Unique*, 67.

⁴ Weintraub, *City Unique*, 61.

Newspaper publications began reporting on illegal gambling businesses and their proprietors following Judge John Cannon's inquiry into the civic administration of Montreal, which revealed widespread corruption in what had become a bookie's domain. Similarly, newspaper editorials from the late 1920s and 1930s reported extensive police corruption while conducting raids on illegal gambling houses. In these subsequent articles, editors condemned the largest underworld profiteers, which included members of Montreal's Jewish community who had established and maintained connections with the most prominent gambling houses in the city. Montreal Jewish immigrants heavily involved in illegal betting rings reaped substantial profits from their gambling businesses. In the 1930s, for example, Harry Davis ruled over the Montreal underworld as the city's 'edge man,' essentially "the go-between for gamblers, politicians and police."⁵ According to Al Palmer, a former journalist for the *Montreal Herald* and the *Montreal Gazette*, Harry Davis was the "undisputed boss of all vice in the city and [had] the final say-so in all matters concerning gambling and other less reputable endeavours."⁶ Davis was one of Montreal's most notorious mobsters and headed a massive gang that controlled much of the drug trade, prostitution and gambling in the city. However, his criminal exploits did not go unnoticed. Davis was routinely involved in targeted police investigations for trafficking drugs and ordering mob hits. His Mount Royal Bridge Club, the city's most lucrative gambling den, was the site of several raids for gambling offences and mob violence. Two of his most publicized crimes in the 1920s and 1930s included smuggling drugs into the United States and the murder of his former gang associate, Charlie Feigenbaum. The Montreal police regularly forced Davis to pay fines for his offences, or they dropped the charges altogether. However, in 1933, he received a fourteen-year prison sentence for trafficking drugs founded on the incriminating testimony of

⁵ Al Palmer, *Montreal Confidential*, 24.

⁶ Palmer, *Montreal Confidential*, 24.

his associate, Feigenbaum. The Montreal press often covered Davis' criminal exploits, prompting different responses from the city's French and Jewish communities.

The prominence of Jewish gangsters in the press did not overshadow the prevalence of antisemitism in Canada. French and English newspapers claimed that the influx of Jewish immigrants in Montreal was responsible for "the growing poverty and congestion in downtrodden urban neighbourhoods where drunkenness, crime, and prostitution flourished."⁷ More conservative publications used the exploits of Jewish gangsters as evidence that Canada seemed "under siege from unwanted 'foreigners' and 'aliens' who could never assimilate to 'Canadian' values and standards."⁸ Moreover, Jewish criminals greatly influenced exclusionary visions of Canadian nationhood, which branded Jews "as outsiders and a legitimate threat to Canada's Christian identity."⁹ While Canadian newspapers seized upon the exploits of notorious Jewish gangsters, the Jewish press was far more concerned with how criminality threatened to undo the more respectable image cultivated by community leaders. Far from embracing the notoriety of Jewish gang members, Montreal's Jewish community was disturbed and embarrassed by the Jewish connection to organized crime reported in leading publications.¹⁰ Although Jewish community leaders were hesitant to draw attention to the antisemitic sentiments expressed in articles, they were determined to combat these negative associations by distinguishing between the behaviour of legitimate community members and the deviancy of Jewish gangsters. For example, editorials in the *Canadian Jewish Review* asserted that Jewish criminals were undesirable citizens and suffered from a lack of "spiritual and moral education"

⁷ Allan Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City: The Canadian Jewish Experience* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2018), 102.

⁸ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 105.

⁹ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 143.

¹⁰ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 192.

that distanced them from the Jewish community.¹¹ The criminal exploits of Jewish gang associates sparked moral outrage among Jewish community members as the coveted reputation of Canadian Jews as upstanding Canadians seemed in danger at the same time as they were lobbying against Canada's restrictive immigration policies. As a result, the notoriety of Jewish gangsters inflamed tensions between the Jewish community and French-Canadian society. Newspaper articles denouncing the Jewish connection to crime revealed anxieties over Jewish immigration that reverberated throughout Montreal for several years.

As Prohibition laws began taking hold throughout Canada, the demand for liquor advanced many criminal organizations in the Canadian underworld. Stephen Schneider, one of Canada's leading scholars on organized crime, argued that Prohibition produced some of Canada's most organized smuggling operations, contributing "to the modernization, consolidation, and expansion of organized crime throughout North America."¹² Under Prohibition, some Canadian Jews realized the potential of the underground liquor market and capitalized on Canada's temperance laws to maximize their bootlegging profits. However, antisemitism became a deeply entrenched aspect of Canadian society. In the 1920s, English and French newspapers regularly denounced the Jewish community as an immoral threat "that could never really truly assimilate into a Christian nation."¹³ According to Canadian historian and author Allan Levine, the editors of Quebec's *Le Soleil* summarized the hatred toward the Jews with the claim: "We owe nothing to Jews ... We are a Christian country, a Christian nation and not a neutral, unbelieving and materialistic one."¹⁴ The editorial's view that the Jews were a

¹¹ "Every Friday," *Canadian Jewish Review*, September 24, 1926, p. 10. [Canadian Jewish review, September 24, 1926, page 10 | SFU Digitized Newspapers](#)

¹² Stephen Schneider, *Iced: The Story of Organized Crime in Canada* (Mississauga, Ont: Wiley, 2009), 205.

¹³ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 140.

¹⁴ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 143.

legitimate threat to Canada's Christian identity became a frequent topic for French Catholic writers, who "blamed Jews for corrupting Quebec's morals and values."¹⁵ Such notions of Jews as unassimilable people responsible for the "moral decay" of Canadian society contributed to "the widely held perception that Jews monopolized the liquor business, reaping huge profits from bootlegging" during the Prohibition era.¹⁶ While some Jews took advantage of the sales opportunities offered by the contraband liquor trade, they were not the only ones to do so. However, Canadian publications provided their readers with a "distorted view that only Jews were shipping liquor to the U.S."¹⁷ Following the repeal of temperance laws in Canada, Montreal's Jewish community faced continued antisemitism with highly moralistic editorials condemning the criminal involvement of Jewish gang members and their connections to the city's illegal gambling dens. As a result, Prohibition laws had "forged a more elaborate form of logistical organization for criminal entrepreneurs and, following repeal, this new organizational structure was carried over to other forms of criminal conspiracies," most notably in Montreal's illegal gambling rackets.¹⁸

Despite the end of Prohibition, Montreal's vice economy continued to thrive as illegal gambling dens, drug dealings, and prostitution remained the most profitable sources of income for criminal groups in Montreal. By the late 1920s, Montreal was widely considered "an oasis in the desert for men and women who wanted to try their luck," sprawling with numerous establishments offering illicit forms of entertainment.¹⁹ Montreal's sinful reputation as "the most lawless city in North America" was bolstered following the Prohibition era with the rise of

¹⁵ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 144.

¹⁶ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 144.

¹⁷ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 146.

¹⁸ Schneider, *Iced*, 223.

¹⁹ Weintraub, *City Unique*, 61.

Montreal's gambling underworld and the Jewish crime bosses who ran some of the most powerful criminal organizations in Canada.²⁰ Harry Davis and Charlie Feigenbaum became some of Montreal's most prosperous bookmakers and gambling house operators. By the 1930s, they expanded the city's gambling and betting parlours to the point where a "gambler could lay a bet in one of over two hundred establishments in greater Montreal that collectively generated \$100 million a year in revenue."²¹ In addition to these clubs, Jewish gangsters ran the most prominent bookmaking operations with long-distance telephone and telegraph connections, allowing them to bet on horse races across North America.²²

Montreal's illegal gambling establishments did not go unnoticed by the authorities. Following the formal enactment of Canadian Prohibition, Montreal newspapers reported that well-bribed municipal politicians and police officers allowed gambling businesses to continue to operate. For example, an editorial from the *Globe* headlined "Corruption Ran Riot In Montreal" detailed Judge Lawrence John Cannon's inquiry into the municipal administration of Montreal.²³ Cannon served as a judge of the Superior Court for the Trois-Rivières district and provided "a seething denunciation" of the corruption he found among many members of Montreal's city officials, including the chairman of the Police Commission.²⁴ Cannon claimed that the evidence presented provided "an accurate idea of the existing abuses and irregularities in the civic administration of Montreal."²⁵ Moreover, Cannon's report on the investigation argued that

²⁰ Weintraub, *City Unique*, 70.

²¹ Schneider, *Iced*, 238.

²² Schneider, *Iced*, 238.

²³ "Corruption Ran Riot In Montreal," *The Globe* (1844-1936), December 14, 1909.

<https://ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/corruption-ran-riot-at-montreal/docview/1354451804/se-2>.

²⁴ "Corruption Ran Riot In Montreal," *The Globe*.

²⁵ "Corruption Ran Riot In Montreal," *The Globe*.

corrupt officials allowed gambling businesses to continue to operate.²⁶ For instance, before making a surprise raid on a gambling house, the police phoned the establishment's owner to warn them they were coming.²⁷ Journalist and author D'Arcy O'Connor notes that Montreal's Morality Squad regularly carried out raids on gambling establishments "and, under the province's quaint 'Padlock Law,' would seize a telephone or two before affixing a padlock to the offending room, which more often than not, was empty or perhaps simply a broom closet or bathroom."²⁸ Yet, the "front door, on the street, always remained open to customers."²⁹ The police officers returned to the station and filed reports for another "successful" raid on a den of iniquity.³⁰ Police crackdowns on Montreal's illegal gambling dens became part of "an elaborate charade, designed to persuade the public that something was being done to combat rampant vice in the city."³¹ As a result, the involvement of corrupt municipal politicians and police officers allowed Jewish gangsters to continue to operate and make substantial profits from illegal gambling houses. Montreal newspapers reported on associations between corrupt police and municipal officials with Jewish gangsters, cementing the notion that Jewish immigrants were corrupting the city's moral values in the public imagination.

Harry Davis, an immigrant from Romania, arrived in Montreal as a nearly penniless young man during the 1920s, where he began his descent through the criminal underworld leading one of the city's most notorious crime syndicates.³² By his late forties, Davis had reached the top ranks of Montreal's underworld as the city's edge man and was "making big

²⁶ "Corruption Ran Riot In Montreal," *The Globe*.

²⁷ Weintraub, *City Unique*, 59.

²⁸ D'Arcy O'Connor and Miranda O'Connor, "Montreal's Jewish Mafia," in *Montreal's Irish Mafia: The True Story of the Infamous West End Gang* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2011), 34.

²⁹ Weintraub, *City Unique*, 60.

³⁰ O'Connor, *Montreal's Irish Mafia*, 34.

³¹ Weintraub, *City Unique*, 59.

³² Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 190.

money from gambling, prostitution, fencing stolen property, and dealing in drugs.”³³ According to Stephen Schneider, Harry Davis was Montreal’s most powerful gambling headman with the final say in who else could operate in the city’s gambling industry, receiving “an estimated 20 percent of the net returns from other gambling operators.”³⁴ Davis was responsible for gathering payoffs from the downtown gambling houses and distributing them between police and municipal politicians awaiting their weekly amount. Moreover, he “had to keep the peace within the gambling industry, where tough racketeers were competing with each other.”³⁵ He oversaw the Mount Royal Bridge Club, the largest gambling house in Montreal “located directly across the road from the home of the town’s police chief and lone constable.”³⁶ Gambling at the famed Mount Royal Bridge Club “often took in as much as \$100,000 on weekends through its crap games and roulette wheels” and saw many prominent citizens.³⁷ In the 1930s, Davis had teamed up with fellow Jewish gangsters Pincus “Pinky” Brecher and “Fat” Charlie Feigenbaum to smuggle in large amounts of cocaine and heroin worth more than \$200,000 hidden among rolls of imported silk and other commodities from Paris into the Port of Montreal.³⁸ However, the law finally caught up with Feigenbaum, and he received a sentence of five-and-a-half years in prison for illegally smuggling silk into Canada.³⁹ Meanwhile, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) became aware of Davis’ drug operations and “through surveillance and wire taps busted it wide open.”⁴⁰ Montreal newspapers expressed their disdain for Davis, Brecher and his other

³³ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 190.

³⁴ Schneider, *Iced*, 240.

³⁵ Weintraub, *City Unique*, 71.

³⁶ Schneider, *Iced*, 240.

³⁷ Schneider, *Iced*, 238.

³⁸ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 191.

³⁹ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 191.

⁴⁰ O’Connor, *Montreal’s Irish Mafia*, 35.

gang associates, commenting on the negative relationship between the Jewish community and crime. For example, this 1933 newspaper article from *Le Devoir* reporting,

“Davis Found Guilty: The great narcotics smuggler will receive his sentence at the end of the terms of the Assizes.” The article noted,

The Court of King’s Bench jury found Harry Davis to have conspired and smuggled narcotics into Canada and traded with France and the United States. Davis is only 31 years old and recognized as the king of narcotics smuggling in America and Europe. During his remarks, the presiding judge before Davis, Judge Greenshields, stated that he had never seen such a vast conspiracy as the one directed by the accused to import into the country deadly poison likely to cause the depletion of thousands of human beings. The Canadian Mounted Police took the case against Davis, and it was his employees, Israelites like Davis, who delivered the chief to the R.C.M.P. Davis will not receive his sentence until the end of the present term of the Assizes.⁴¹

The *Le Devoir* article above comments on the incarceration of Harry Davis while infusing highly moralistic language about Jewish criminality, which demonstrates the underlying antisemitism in Montreal during the 1930s. For example, the report made moralistic judgements about the behaviour of Montreal Jews by emphasizing the Jewishness of Davis and his associates when referring to them as “Israelites.”⁴² Moreover, the article fostered dangerous stereotypes and prejudices toward Canadian Jews through its description of the “deadly poison likely to cause the depletion of thousands of human beings,” which is substantially similar to the language used in antisemitic editorials that claimed Montreal Jewish immigrants were unwanted “aliens” who could never assimilate into Canadian values and standards.⁴³ Montreal newspapers commonly depicted Jews as parasites, spreading an insidious disease undermining Canada’s national health. These descriptions of Jews as corrupting Canadian society criticized the substantial immigration

⁴¹ Translation. “Davis trouvé coupable: Le grand contrebandier de narcotiques recevra sa sentence à la fin du termes des Assises.” *Le Devoir*, October 7, 1933. Alex Dworkin/Canadian Jewish Archives.

⁴² “Davis trouvé coupable,” *Le Devoir*.

⁴³ “Davis trouvé coupable,” *Le Devoir*.

of Jewish immigrants and led anti-immigration campaigns that lobbied strenuously to keep Jews out of Montreal. For example, an editorial in the *Globe* revealed antisemitism in the St. Louis ward of Montreal, where Abbe Belinger, a parish priest, stated that “there was a systematic movement in St. Louis ward to keep Jews out of the district, even to the extent of the formation of a syndicate to prevent the sale of property to Jews.”⁴⁴ Belinger claimed that residents of the area “objected to the Jewish invasion.”⁴⁵ As a result, French and English newspapers in the 1930s used the exploits of Jewish gangsters to characterize the Jewish community as unwelcome foreigners threatening Canada’s Christian identity.

While serving his prison sentence, Feigenbaum began having reservations about his partnership with Davis. He believed Davis intended to pin the crimes on him and take over his gambling operations while he languished in prison. With intimate knowledge of the Davis gang’s drug business, Feigenbaum testified against his former partners in exchange for a reduced sentence of only six months in prison. In a trial held in October 1933, Davis was found guilty “on all five accounts of importing drugs and corrupting public officials.”⁴⁶ Feigenbaum supplied most of the evidence against him with detailed descriptions of the drug business. As a result, Davis received a sentence of “ten strokes of the lash, a \$10,000 fine, and fourteen years in Laval’s Saint-Vincent-de-Paul Penitentiary.”⁴⁷ The prosecution also planned to have Feigenbaum testify against Brecher in a separate trial scheduled for the following year.

⁴⁴ “To Keep the Jews Out: Movement in St. Louis Ward of Montreal Action to Break a Lease Supported by the Parish Priest Judge Guerin Strongly Condemns the Spirit Displayed,” *The Globe* (1844-1936), February 10, 1910. <https://ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/keep-jews-out/docview/1354030691/se-2>.

⁴⁵ “To Keep the Jews Out,” *The Globe*.

⁴⁶ O’Connor, *Montreal’s Irish Mafia*, 35.

⁴⁷ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 191.



Figure 1. Mugshots of Montreal's underworld ruler Harry Davis in the 1930s.
Centre d'histoire de Montréal.

Although Feigenbaum was back on the streets of Montreal, he paid heavily for the damaging testimony of his associates. Feigenbaum foolishly assumed he could return to smuggling and illegal gambling. Instead, he became Montreal's first gangland murder victim. On August 21, 1934, Feigenbaum "walked out of his brother's house on Esplanade Avenue, a few blocks from the Main, accompanied by his eighteen-year-old son Jackie. There was a black Hudson sedan parked across the street. The man in the passenger seat got out, moved closer to Feigenbaum, and shot him six times in the chest and head. He then calmly returned to the car, which sped off."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 191-192.



Figure 2. On August 22, 1934, the *Montreal Daily Star* relates that “Fat” Charlie Feigenbaum, who had provided damaging testimony against his former partners, was killed on a residential street.

Alex Dworkin/Canadian Jewish Archives.

The Feigenbaum murder became the first of Montreal’s deadliest gangland slayings involving the violent death of a Jewish gangster. The Feigenbaum slaying became a sensationalized gangland murder case that put Jewish gangsters at the forefront of the public imagination. Although many residents on the street witnessed the daytime hit, the *Globe* reported that they “all gave different descriptions of the crime and of the bandits,” and the police never apprehended the killers.⁴⁹ The police believed they were “professional hitmen who’d been hired

⁴⁹ “Montreal Police Comb Underworld To Id Killers: Six Arrests Made-In Murder Of Charles Feigenbaum Believed Outside Mob.” *The Globe* (1844-1936), August 23, 1934.
<https://ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/montreal-police-gomb-underworld-id-killers/docview/1351802461/se-2>.

from out of town, perhaps New York or Chicago, and possibly by the incarcerated Harry Davis.”⁵⁰

Shortly after Feigenbaum’s death, Harry Davis was released from prison and immediately reopened his bookmaking and gambling parlour, determined to return as the undisputed boss of the criminal underworld. According to Suzanne Morton, a professor of twentieth-century Canadian and gender history at McGill University, the death of the previous edge man, Eddy ‘Kid’ Baker, “led to a struggle for control of gambling in the city, which fostered instability and even violence.”⁵¹ Harry Davis, out of prison from his narcotics charge, emerged as the ‘king’ of Montreal gambling. He resumed his position as the city’s edge man, collecting money from fellow bookies and gamblers and paying off the police to look the other way. However, Davis was up against substantial competition on his return to the Montreal underworld as “others within both the Italian and Jewish communities had taken over most of the city’s rackets in his absence.”⁵² Moreover, these rivals resented his sense of entitlement and how quickly he had taken over the underworld. Within a year of his return to commercial gambling in Montreal, Davis was shot dead outside his gambling establishment by Louis Bercovitch, a rival Jewish gangster.⁵³ Bercovitch maintained that he had killed Davis in self-defence when the two argued over Bercovitch’s attempt to open a gambling house.⁵⁴ However, “Davis felt that the field was already overcrowded, and so he denied Bercovitch the go-ahead that he wanted.”⁵⁵ Bercovitch claimed that they met alone in Davis’ back office, where they continued to argue until Davis

⁵⁰ O’Connor, *Montreal’s Irish Mafia*, 35.

⁵¹ Suzanne Morton, *At Odds: Gambling and Canadians, 1919-1969* (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 158.

⁵² O’Connor, *Montreal’s Irish Mafia*, 36.

⁵³ O’Connor, *Montreal’s Irish Mafia*, 36.

⁵⁴ Morton, *At Odds*, 159.

⁵⁵ Weintraub, *City Unique*, 71.

reached for a gun, and Bercovitch “reacted by pulling out his own gun and shot Davis dead with a bullet to the chest and another to the head before fleeing the scene.”⁵⁶ The Montreal press used the violent death of another Jewish gangster as representing the moral corruption against Canada’s Christian society from illegal gambling dens and foreign newcomers. Newspaper editorials used sensationalist headlines describing Harry Davis as the “Big-Shot Bookie” slain in a Montreal “Gang War” by the “Gambler’s Slayer,” Louis Bercovitch. The murder of Harry Davis shook the country as citizens “realized, probably for the first time, that Montreal’s gangdom was a real and vicious thing.”⁵⁷

Feigenbaum and Davis’ deaths scandalized Montreal’s Jewish community, adding credence to the distorted view that only Jews were involved in the criminal underworld. Much to the embarrassment and horror of the Jewish community, the violent slaying of another Jewish gangster received substantial press coverage and attention from French and English newspapers, which began to draw a connection between Montreal’s Jewish immigrant community and the criminal underworld. These publications focused their coverage on the criminal activities of prominent Jewish gangsters to link Jewishness with criminality in the public imagination. For example, an article published in the *Montreal Gazette* called Harry Davis the “fish-eyed gambler.”⁵⁸ It also emphasized Jewish involvement in crime by commenting on how “the ambition of Harry Davis apparently went beyond his capacity and his means, that is so far as legitimate business was concerned.”⁵⁹ The article suggests that “Harry Davis could have been a very smart, successful and probably respected citizen of this city” had he “operated like any

⁵⁶ O’Connor, *Montreal’s Irish Mafia*, 36.

⁵⁷ Palmer, *Montreal Confidential*, 25.

⁵⁸ “Gambler Is Slain In Uptown Book: Revenge-Mad Killer Fires Thrice At Harry Davis as Bettors Play - Immigrant Boy’s Night Life Career Led to Narcotics, Prison, Racketeering.” *The Montreal Gazette*, July 26, 1946. Alex Dworkin/Canadian Jewish Archives.

⁵⁹ “Gambler Is Slain In Uptown Book.”

industrious, ambitious immigrant boy in a great country that promises a living to all who wish to work.”⁶⁰ These articles played a vital role in reproducing dangerous stereotypes of Jews as unassimilable people, revealing widespread antisemitism among Canadians during a period of restrictive Jewish immigration policies. While the Jewish community did not embrace these underworld figures, leading newspapers of the period attracted the interest of Canadian audiences with articles that accused Jewish immigrants of corrupting Canada’s values and morals. As a result, Jewish gangsters represented larger, more complex anxieties in Canadian society that questioned the ability of Jews to assimilate into mainstream Canadian society.

During the 1920s and 1930s, French and English newspapers frequently portrayed Jews as dangerous newcomers “who threatened the virtuous ideal imagined for Canada; and, above all, as a ‘race’ that could never truly assimilate into a Christian nation.”⁶¹ Moreover, antisemitism became an entrenched and accepted aspect of Canadian society, publicly conveyed through claims of Jewish corruption. According to Allan Levine, for French Catholic and nationalist journalists, religious differences made it impossible for Jews to assimilate into Canadian society and, therefore, a legitimate threat to Canada’s Christian identity. Many French Catholic writers, more extreme in their opinions and insecure about their place in Canada, demonized Jews as “foreign invaders and an immoral threat, and as personally introducing impurities into the Canadian gene pool.”⁶² For example, in September 1933, Anatole Vanier, in *L’Action nationale*, the journal of the *Ligue d’Action nationale*, wrote that Jews were “one of the worst viruses to attack our religious and national traditions.”⁶³ During the 1930s, antisemitism in Quebec “was more pronounced, received more prominent attention in newspapers like *Le*

⁶⁰ “Gambler Is Slain In Uptown Book.”

⁶¹ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 140.

⁶² Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 167.

⁶³ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 167.

Devoir, and was more volatile than elsewhere in the country.”⁶⁴ According to Allan Levine, this resulted from “French-Canadian nationalist insecurities, compounded by the severe worldwide economic crisis and the influence of Nazi and fascist ideology from Germany and Italy, linked to the rise of Hitler and Mussolini.”⁶⁵ Meanwhile, widespread anxieties about Jewish immigration into Canada were widely and openly promoted in Montreal’s newspapers, claiming that the connection between Montreal’s Jewish community and the gambling underworld made Jews eternally un-Canadian, incapable of abiding by the morality of the dominant culture. As a result, newspaper publications used the criminal exploits of Jewish gangsters to justify Canada’s restrictive antisemitic immigration policies.

The criminal exploits of Jewish gangsters aroused moral outrage among Jewish community leaders, who sought to challenge negative associations between Jews and Montreal’s criminal underworld. Newspaper articles discussing the Jewish connection to gambling and crime shocked and embarrassed Montreal’s Jewish community. An editorial in the *Canadian Jewish Review* claimed that “the Jewish gangster, criminal, hold-up man and the increase in numbers of his kind is a sore on the Jewish community” because the Montreal “community at large overestimates it, wants to know the reason, and charges it up to all Jews.”⁶⁶ With heightened press coverage of Jewish corruption, Montreal’s Jewish community felt obligated to address the presence of Jewish gangsters while distancing themselves away from negative associations with criminality. However, when confronting rampant antisemitism in Montreal, Jewish community leaders “were generally reticent to draw attention to prejudice and discrimination,” as they argued that they would gain nothing by publicizing the “Jewish

⁶⁴ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 167.

⁶⁵ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 167.

⁶⁶ “Every Friday,” *Canadian Jewish Review*.

Problem.”⁶⁷ Instead, they were determined to combat these harmful associations by distinguishing between the behaviour of legitimate community members and the notoriety of Jewish gangsters. Following the murder of Charlie Feigenbaum, Canadian-Jewish journalist Israel Medres argues that Jewish newspaper editors stressed that the crime had “nothing to do with the Jewish community as a whole” and that “it would be much better if the Jews were to be clean of such men and of such damaging spectacles.”⁶⁸ With the death of Harry Davis, Jewish publications hastened to explain the murder of another Jewish gangster and protect the more respectable image cultivated by community leaders. For example, Jewish publications called Davis a “victim of circumstances” to shift responsibility onto police corruption.⁶⁹ In addition, editorials in the *Canadian Jewish Review* asserted that Jewish criminals and gangsters suffered from a lack of “spiritual and moral education” that severed them from the Jewish community.⁷⁰ Jewish publications claimed that the moral degeneration of Jewish gangsters resulted from “their estrangement and side-stepping from the Jewish manner of living” as they do not find themselves in “the moral and spiritual power necessary to resist all temptations.”⁷¹ Therefore, Canadian newspapers captivated audiences with the criminal exploits of Montreal’s Jewish gangsters while Jewish community members sought to challenge unpleasant associations with criminal behaviour.

Altogether, the Jewish crime bosses of the 1920s and 1930s transformed Montreal’s criminal underworld into a profitable enterprise. However, the prominence of Jewish gangsters did not overshadow the prevalence of antisemitism in Canada nor grant them popularity within

⁶⁷ Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City*, 173.

⁶⁸ Israel Medres, *Between the Wars: Canadian Jews in Transition, The Keneder Adler* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2003), 59; *CJCH*, January 2, 1931.

⁶⁹ Medres, *Between the Wars*.

⁷⁰ “Every Friday,” *Canadian Jewish Review*.

⁷¹ “Every Friday,” *Canadian Jewish Review*.

the Jewish community. Instead, Canadian publications sensationalized the exploits of Jewish gangsters as evidence of the alleged corruption of Jewish immigrants who were intent on destroying Canadian society. Meanwhile, many members of the Montreal Jewish community were shocked and concerned by the Jewish connection to organized crime. As Canadian Jews lobbied against Canada's restrictive immigration policies, the notoriety of Jewish mobsters undermined their coveted reputation as upstanding Canadians. As a result, Jewish publications sought to explain the Jewish connection to the gambling underworld commented on in French and English newspapers. Moreover, these articles were instrumental in reinforcing and perpetuating harmful stereotypes of Jews as incapable of being accepted into Canadian society, demonstrating the prevalence of antisemitism during a period of restrictive Jewish immigration regulations.

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