

Monda Halpern

**A “Ghoulish Jamboree”:
The Not-So-Jewish Jewish Funeral of Mob Boss
Bessie Starkman^I**

Abstract

Bessie Starkman (1890–1930), along with her lover Rocco Perri, was one of the most notorious crime bosses in 1920s Canada. When unknown thugs murdered the forty-year-old at her Hamilton, Ontario home, Canada's underworld lost one of its most powerful figures, and according to one writer "the only Jewish woman who ever commanded an Italian mob." Focused on the couple's criminality and Starkman's 1930 murder, scholars have generally sidestepped exploration of her Jewish identity and background. Indeed, in 2005, author Robin Rowland declared simply that when the wife and mother ran off with the Italian Catholic Perri, she "abandoned her husband, children, and Jewish faith"; almost every subsequent source on Starkman has quoted or paraphrased this assertion. The notion that Bessie Starkman "deserted the Jewish faith," however, requires greater scrutiny, especially as the concept of religious abandonment had consequences regarding funerary ritual and interment. Unlike other works that describe Starkman's extravagant funeral to emphasize her celebrity, Perri's husbandly devotion, or the occasion's cultural/religious pluralism, this article examines Starkman's funeral and burial specifically through a Jewish lens and highlights the cultural and religious tension that surrounded these rites. Thanks largely to Perri, there were two major features that conformed to Jewish custom, notably the rabbi officiant and Starkman's burial in Hamilton's Orthodox Jewish cemetery. But the simple Jewish funeral that prioritized the dignity, privacy, and purity of the body clashed with Perri's explicit desire for a spectacle, one marked by crowds, adulation, and opulence. Ultimately, Starkman's public funeral, as one observer noted, became a "ghoulis jamboree."

Résumé

Bessie Starkman (1890–1930), avec son amant Rocco Perri, était l'un des chefs du crime les plus notoires du Canada des années 1920. Lorsque des inconnus ont assassiné la quadragénaire à son domicile de Hamilton, en Ontario, le crime organisé canadien a perdu l'une de ses figures les plus puissantes et, selon un auteur, « la seule femme juive à avoir jamais commandé un groupe mafieux italien ». En s'attardant sur ce couple criminel et sur le meurtre de Starkman en 1930, les chercheur.e.s ont généralement évité la prise en compte de son identité et de ses origines juives. En effet, en 2005, l'auteur Robin Rowland déclare simplement que lorsque l'épouse et mère s'est enfuie avec le catholique italien Perri, elle « a abandonné son mari, ses enfants et sa foi juive » et presque toutes les sources ultérieures sur Starkman ont cité ou paraphrasé cette affirmation. L'idée selon laquelle Bessie Starkman « a abandonné la foi juive » mérite cependant un examen plus approfondi, d'autant plus que le concept d'abandon religieux a eu des conséquences en matière de rituels funéraires et d'inhumation. Contrairement à d'autres ouvrages qui décrivent les funérailles extravagantes de Starkman pour souligner sa célébrité, le dévouement conjugal de Perri ou le pluralisme culturel/religieux de l'évènement, cet article ex-

amine les funérailles et l'enterrement de Starkman à travers une lentille juive et met en évidence les tensions culturelles/religieuses qui en découlent. C'est notamment en grande partie grâce à Perri que deux éléments majeurs étaient conformes à la coutume juive, notamment la présence du rabbin pour officier la cérémonie et l'enterrement de Starkman au cimetière juif orthodoxe de Hamilton. Mais la simplicité des funérailles juives, qui privilégient la dignité, l'intimité et la pureté du corps se heurtaient au désir explicite de Perri d'un spectacle marqué par la foule, l'adulation et l'opulence. En fin de compte, les funérailles publiques de Starkman, comme l'a noté un observateur, sont devenues un « jamboree macabre ».

Bessie Starkman (1890–1930) was one of the most notorious crime bosses in 1920s Canada. With the 1916 Ontario Temperance Act and the advent of American prohibition after 1920, she and her paramour Rocco Perri exported liquor throughout Ontario and into the United States, establishing the Calabrian Perri mob as pre-eminent in the world of Canadian organized crime.² The success of the Hamilton, Ontario-based operation was largely attributable to Starkman who, as the disgruntled Jewish wife of a bakery driver and the mother of two toddlers, ran away with Perri and became the mastermind of their multi-million-dollar business. When unknown thugs murdered the forty-year-old Starkman in her garage, Canada's underworld lost one of its most powerful figures, and according to one writer, “the only Jewish woman who ever commanded an Italian mob.”³

Focused on the couple's criminality and Starkman's 1930 murder, scholars have generally sidestepped exploration of Starkman's Jewish identity and background. For the most part, they have treated her Jewishness as a curiosity, as barely relevant, or, most notably, as discarded. Indeed, in 2005, author Robin Rowland declared that when Starkman ran off with the Italian Catholic Perri, she “abandoned her husband, children, and Jewish faith”; almost every subsequent source on Starkman has quoted or paraphrased this assertion.⁴ Even at the time of her death, the press noted that the “Jewess” had chosen “to leave her people” and that due to her disreputable standing as “Perri's common-law wife” (that is, a married woman whose partner was not her husband, Jewish, or respectable), she had been “severed from her people and the synagogue.”⁵ Certainly, Starkman distanced herself from her siblings and the Jewish community by immersing herself in the Italian culture of Perri's blood and mob family.⁶ In the 1921 census, for example, she adopted his last name and, rather curiously, indicated falsely that she was born in Italy to Italian parents, emigrated from Italy to Canada, and was Roman Catholic.⁷

The notion that Bessie Starkman “deserted the Jewish faith,” however, requires greater scrutiny, especially as the concept of religious abandonment had consequences regarding funerary ritual and interment.⁸ Unlike other works that describe Starkman's extravagant funeral to emphasize her celebrity, Perri's husbandly devotion, or the occasion's cultural/religious pluralism, this article examines Starkman's

funeral and burial specifically through a Jewish lens and highlights the cultural and religious tension that surrounded these rites.⁹ Thanks largely to Perri, there were two major features that conformed to Jewish custom, notably the rabbi officiant and Starkman's burial in Hamilton's Orthodox Jewish cemetery.¹⁰ However, the simple Jewish funeral that prioritized the dignity, privacy, and purity of the body clashed with Perri's explicit desire for a spectacle, one marked by crowds, adulation, and opulence.¹¹ Ultimately, Starkman's public funeral, as one observer noted, became a "ghoulisb jamboree."¹²

Bessie Starkman was born in Poland in 1890, and as a child immigrated with her parents and brothers to Toronto. Living among thousands of other poor immigrant Jews, she eventually found work in a garment factory. In 1907, at the age of eighteen, she married fellow Jewish immigrant Harry Toben and by 1911 had two daughters, Gertrude and Lily.¹³ The family resided on Chestnut Street in the heart of Toronto's Jewish ghetto where Harry drove a bakery truck.¹⁴

In order to make ends meet, the family took in a boarder. Born in 1887, Rocco Perri was an Italian immigrant from Calabria who worked in construction and in any trade or business in which he could find work. Dissatisfied with her grueling and tedious life with the lackluster Harry, Bessie was said to be immediately attracted to the impoverished, but charming and ambitious Perri. In 1913, after an indiscreet affair with Perri, Bessie left Toben and their two toddlers and ran away with Perri to nearby St. Catharines, Ontario.¹⁵

Two years later, the couple moved to a poor downtown immigrant neighbourhood in Hamilton, Ontario where they quickly infiltrated the city's Italian criminal underworld. They ran a brothel and trafficked liquor, and over the next several years, especially after Canada's 1916 temperance laws, became enormously successful.¹⁶ In 1920, they moved to a prestigious neighbourhood in central Hamilton where they established themselves as the preeminent criminal power couple in the city, province, and country.¹⁷

Law enforcement was well aware of the Perris' criminal exploits. The couple was routinely embroiled in targeted police investigations, including those involving murder and manslaughter, and the Perri's lavish Bay Street South home was the site of bootlegging offences, mob violence and several raids for weapons. Three of their most publicized transgressions in the 1920s include smuggling spirits into the United States; poisoning liquor by using cheap and toxic alcohol substitutes, a ploy which caused thirty-eight deaths; and perjury, after Rocco and Bessie lied about their assets to the 1926 Royal Commission on Customs and Excise.¹⁸ They had to regularly pay fines for their offences, or charges were dropped altogether, but remarkably Bessie never served jail time and Rocco was incarcerated for only six months.¹⁹ Far from striving for obscurity, the heavily surveilled couple often engaged with the press,



Rocco Perri and Bessie Starkman. Source: *Toronto Daily Star*, June 15, 1927.

with the charismatic Rocco even giving interviews in which he boasted of his entrepreneurial success.²⁰

With Starkman's foray into the drug trade at the end of prohibition in the late 1920s, however, the couple's good fortune took a tragic turn. Apparently, an increasingly heartless and greedy Bessie refused to hand over money owed to powerful American drug suppliers and was the victim of mob retribution. On the night of Wednesday, August 13, 1930, after waiting for Starkman and Perri to arrive home, two men murdered Bessie in her own garage. They shot her twice in the neck and chest, instantly killing her. Perri managed to escape, provoking initial suspicions by police that he ordered the hit, or at the very least, knew the assailants and was forewarned of the

attack.²¹ Devastated in the days following the murder, which an exhaustive investigation by police failed to solve, Rocco, Gertrude, and Lily turned their attention to Bessie's funeral.²²

Historians have generally ignored the topic of funerary practices and preferences in Canada. Bruce Bowden and Roger Hall noted in 1982 that comparable to the nineteenth-century Ontario cemetery located on the margins of town, "as a subject of enquiry, society's effort to cope with death has been even more on the periphery of Canadian scholarship."²³ Similarly, historian Arthur Aryeh Goren laments that "Modern Jewish historians . . . have given little attention to the study of attitudes towards death, cemeteries, and monuments" and that the public funeral, in particular, has been a "little studied sphere of the public culture of [North] American Jews."²⁴ In Starkman's case, it offers the ideal space to explore Perri's penchant for spectacle and the ways in which Jewish and Italian Catholic customs collided.

Although Starkman was neither a public servant nor a heroic figure, combined traits that have occasioned the elaborate public funeral, Perri deemed it a deserving tribute to Starkman.²⁵ To Perri, she was the relatively young, much admired, and unsuspecting victim of a heart-rending assassination in her own home.²⁶ Moreover, she was a mother and grandmother. This perception diverged from the more common view that she was a powerful and unscrupulous crime boss who was culpable in her own grisly demise. Ironically, it was this latter, sinister image of Starkman that surely attracted many of the funeral's "sensation-seekers" whose mere presence for Perri would have helped legitimize her "goodness."²⁷ Perri's perception of Starkman as an innocent is consistent with the notion that public funerals emphasize "hyperbolized positive qualities of the dead"; yet, as historian Sarah J. Purcell points out, ultimately, they have "often showcased contesting ideas about the dead and what they stood for."²⁸ In this way, public mourning has played a crucial role in public memory, at once elevating and challenging the collective legacy of the deceased—a legacy which Perri hoped would be exalted and cast a glowing reflection on him.²⁹ As scholar Harry Garlick notes, a persistent feature of the state and self-styled state funeral has been the use of spectacle by its host in order to affirm and enhance his own power and influence.³⁰ Perri was no statesman and the funeral for Bessie was no formal government affair, but the wily Perri would have certainly understood that a funeral that glorified the reputation of his wife would have served to uplift him too.

Garlick, in his monograph on state funerals, observes that the public funeral as spectacle is "a deliberately produced performance, to which each of its basic parts makes a calculated contribution."³¹ These theatrical elements, which comprise compelling visual and auditory displays designed to "shock or startle or amaze," are intended to heighten emotion in mourners already poised for grieving by their knowledge of the deceased and the circumstances of their death.³² Thus, the audience, emotionally primed and anticipating the pending spectacle, "is in a better position to be influ-

enced, persuaded, or manipulated by the actions they witness,” ready to receive and believe the messaging extolling the virtues of the departed.³³

The spectacle is also meant to offer “the emotional reassurance” that comes with experiencing rituals “of cultural group significance.”³⁴ For both the Jews and Italians at the Starkman funeral, spectacle could be found in the familiar and comforting customs of one’s own group, their value both affirmed and subverted by the presence of a contiguous display: the strange, mysterious, and unsettling traditions of the cultural other. From a Jewish perspective, Perri succeeded in getting Starkman buried Jewishly, but his greater and incompatible aspiration was to create a spectacle in which his own Italian sensibilities prevailed, inspiring his pursuit of large crowds, adoration for the deceased, and a show of prosperity.

Likely because she was a source of embarrassment and shame, the Canadian Jewish press proved reticent to discuss Starkman in death. Coverage of her murder and funeral is glaringly absent from both the *Canadian Jewish Review* and the Yiddish-language *Keneder Adler* (*Canadian Eagle*).³⁵ Several articles do appear, however, in Toronto’s local Yiddish paper, the *Yiddisher Journal*.³⁶

Both the *Yiddisher Journal* and the *Toronto Daily Star* used the occasion of her death to point out Starkman’s seldom discussed Judaism. The *Yiddisher Journal* referred repeatedly to Starkman as “the Jewish woman” or “the Jewish wife,” and to Toben and Perri as “the Jewish husband” and “the Italian,” respectively.³⁷ The *Star*, which detailed Jewish aspects of the funeral, noted that Starkman was a “dramatic and dynamic Jewess who mated with an Italian in a liaison of love and sinister business.”³⁸ The paper also quoted a grieving Perri who, in planning her funeral, insisted on the preponderance of Jewish ritual: “I am an Italian. She is a Jewess, and she will be buried in the faith she was born in.”³⁹ As Perri’s declaration suggests, he made a sincere effort, however flawed, to memorialize Starkman Jewishly.

Perri immediately secured a rabbi to preside over the ceremony. The scenario of a Reform cleric officiating in an Orthodox cemetery instantly signaled that the Starkman funeral would not be business as usual. Isadore (Iser) L. Freund, a Lithuanian-born, thirty-four-year-old American, was a North Carolina-based rabbi but was in Hamilton at the time visiting friends.⁴⁰ Years earlier he had held a position at Hamilton’s Temple Anshe Sholom, Canada’s first Reform synagogue, and had married there in 1927.⁴¹ Rabbi Freund was assigned the Starkman funeral because the Orthodox rabbi, Samuel Levine, who presided over Ohev Zedek Cemetery and the associated Orthodox Hess Street Synagogue, refused to participate. He did not want to involve himself with a known criminal or get caught up in her mob connections, and moreover, did not wish to be perceived as validating the lifestyle of a woman who so blatantly flouted the values of Judaism, having left her Jewish husband and forged an adulterous, live-in relationship with a non-Jewish man.⁴² Rabbi Levine

flatly declared, "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."⁴³ Indeed, it is likely that no traditional longtime pulpit rabbi like Levine, who was accountable to a mainstream congregation and who was an esteemed community activist and scholar, would have wished to assume a public role in the funeral.⁴⁴ Thus, it was Freund's last-minute intercession that enabled the ceremony, along with the willingness of the Orthodox to relinquish their cemetery to a Reform rabbi whose supervision of the *ad hoc* service they deigned to tolerate.⁴⁵ Reform Judaism, as a modern sect, sought to loosen the grip of what many assimilating Jews saw as the antiquated laws, ritual, and tribalism of Orthodoxy, which allowed Rabbi Freund to more comfortably overlook Starkman's unconventional lifestyle and abide Perri's eccentric preferences for the funeral. As Freund declared decades later, "I'm totally modern ... I'm a liberal who believes in outreach. I accommodated intermarriage. Some of my views were controversial, but I always believed in getting along with people of different faiths."⁴⁶ His ultimate goal that day, no doubt, was to get Starkman buried as quickly and efficiently as possible in order to honour Jewish customs and the local rabbis, while placating Perri and his henchmen and managing the throng of manic spectators who had already gathered at the house before proceeding to the cemetery.

At the funeral at the Perri home on Sunday, August 17, Rabbi Freund, frustrated by the clamor and crowds, kept the service simple and brief. He read psalms and prayers in both English and Hebrew, and he offered no eulogy.⁴⁷ Freund's omission ran contrary to Perri's goal of extolling his wife, but it would not have deterred fervent attendees from idealizing Starkman, and it provided one fewer opportunity for skeptical ones to challenge the myth of her virtue. At the cemetery, after Starkman was finally buried, the rabbi recited the Mourner's Kaddish, concluding the ceremony.⁴⁸

Along with securing a rabbi, Perri also ensured that Starkman would be buried in an Orthodox Jewish cemetery. That she was allowed interment at the Orthodox Ohev Zedek, located on the Caledonia Highway on the southern outskirts of the Hamilton escarpment, was particularly remarkable on two levels.⁴⁹ First, its adherence to Jewish law was more rigid than that of the Reform cemetery, which begs the question why, given her unconventional life choices, she was not buried on Reform grounds: her Polish birthplace, Yiddish background, wedding to Harry, and religious siblings, however, all point to an Orthodox affinity.⁵⁰ Second, some of the rituals that Rabbi Freund tolerated violated basic Orthodox tenets. As will be discussed later, some might say that the absence of a *tahara* (ritual cleaning of the body) and especially her ornate metal coffin (prohibited by Jewish law) should have barred her interment at this site. This contravention of Jewish burial laws presumably undercut the community trust, standards, and expectations inherent in the sacred obligation that the Orthodox cemetery assumed.⁵¹ Ultimately, a generous remuneration by Perri helped persuade Orthodox officials to provide access to the grounds and then look the other way.⁵² It is also possible that Perri bullied or threatened them into allowing Stark-

man's burial at the site. There is also little doubt that even though some in the Jewish community "had no desire to take her back, even in death," the Orthodox, Freund, and others wanted a fellow Jew, no matter how abhorrent her actions in life, to be buried Jewishly, even if this goal required some agonizing concessions.⁵³

The claim that Starkman abandoned her faith, then, is not borne out by her interment in Ohev Zedek. Had Starkman officially and publicly denounced her Judaism, she most assuredly would have been denied burial there.⁵⁴ Even the *Hamilton Herald*, which had no stake in her religious adherence, notes that "she never renounced her faith."⁵⁵ It does seem, however, that Starkman, described revealingly in the *Yiddisher Journal* as a "former Jewish woman" who "turned into an Italian," was judged an "arrogant sinner."⁵⁶ An arrogant sinner is one who "publicly, purposefully and arrogantly disown[s] the ways of Israel [that is, the Jewish religion], her faith and practices, her laws and traditions, but do[es] not formally defect from Judaism by embracing another faith."⁵⁷ That Starkman speciously claimed Catholic affiliation in the census or immersed herself in Perri's culture did not make her an apostate.

Starkman's status as an arrogant sinner is evidenced by the apparent absence of the funerary ritual *keriah* (the rending of garments) and the peripheral location of her interment. Presumably, as principal mourners, Starkman's two adult daughters would have participated in *keriah*, "which is the most striking Jewish expression of grief."⁵⁸ One reason for this ritual is that it serves as a symbol of a broken heart, with the rip rendered through the fabric on the mourner's left chest.⁵⁹ The tear should be vertical, about three inches long, executed by the mourner, and clearly visible.⁶⁰ This visually dramatic practice went unreported in accounts of the funeral, however, suggesting that, at the direction of the rabbi, it was never executed by Starkman's daughters, one of several mourning rituals that go deliberately unheeded if the deceased is an arrogant sinner.⁶¹ In addition, the grave of the arrogant sinner is relegated to the back or margins of the cemetery, away from other gravesites.⁶² Starkman was buried on the back, outside right edge.⁶³ Perri challenged the inferior location of Starkman's plot: in May of 1931, intending for the fence to be relocated, he purchased an almost five-acre tract of land adjacent to the cemetery so that Bessie's gravestone, to be erected in the next several months, would sit in the middle of the grounds.⁶⁴ Possibly due to a failed deal, urban development, or the maintenance of Jewish ritual, today Starkman's grave remains next to a fence on the outer right edge of the cemetery, although no longer segregated.

Most striking about Starkman's marker is the enormity of the tombstone. It stands over eight feet tall, towering above all others, and is accompanied by a grave-cover, a large cement slab that rests above ground. Neither the imposing tombstone nor cover was typical of Ohev Zedek where modesty and parity were sought; they were aspirational items among immigrant Italians keen for a magnificent expression of their family's respectability and success.⁶⁵ In the case of Starkman, Perri clear-

ly wanted the monument to reflect the couple's influence and affluence, and likely hoped it would help distract from its stigmatized location.



Bessie Starkman gravestone, Hamilton, ON. Source: Sonia Halpern.

In addition to its mammoth size, various markings on the headstone suggest further violations of Jewish protocol. First, drill holes indicate that the name "Perri" once followed "Starkman." Cemetery officials or Starkman's family likely removed the offending name, which belonged to a man who was neither Bessie's legal husband nor a Jew.⁶⁶ Second, in keeping with Italian custom, the stone also claims a small oval niche reserved for a porcelain portrait of the deceased.⁶⁷ This empty spot bears two drill holes, suggesting that Bessie's likeness was also removed to comply with the tradition of no portrayals on Jewish gravestones.⁶⁸ Third, the Star of David atop the stone is flanked in high relief by the first and last Greek letters, alpha and omega, which represent the start and end of life; as the letters are symbols derived from

Christian scripture and reference the eternal presence of Christ, they would typically be prohibited on Jewish grave markers. It is quite possible that the cemetery lay leaders chose to ignore the small ornamentations, were not aware of their meaning, or were helpless to alter them once the huge stone had been situated.

Despite its audacious size and its inapt insertions, however, the gravestone that Perri furnished was mostly in keeping with Jewish custom. It bears a simple and standard Hebrew inscription.⁶⁹

“HERE LIES/ THE ESTEEMED LADY/ PESSAL DAUGHTER OF SHIMON
THE KOHEN/ WHO DEPARTED LIFE/ 19th of Av [5]690/ MAY HER SOUL BE
BOUND IN THE BOND OF LIFE”⁷⁰

These English words follow:

“IN LOVING MEMORY OF/ BESSIE STARKMAN/
JUNE-21-1890-AUG-13-1930”

However generic and illusory the epitaph, it connects Starkman to her Jewish family, her Yiddish culture, the Jewish calendar, and the people of Israel.

Starkman probably stipulated her wish to be interred in a Jewish cemetery.⁷¹ Given that death constituted an occupational hazard in the mob, she and Perri undoubtedly pondered it more often than most; indeed, shortly before her murder, Starkman considered the possibility of her untimely demise, confiding in her Jewish girlfriend Mae Rosen that it could be imminent.⁷² Her desire for a Jewish burial reflected her resolve to accommodate the wishes of her self-identified Jewish daughters.⁷³ Their insistence that their mother be interred Jewishly partly motivated Perri’s relentless efforts to pursue this plan.⁷⁴ (Another possibility is that he was driven by the optics of unqualified devotion to his wife.) Starkman’s request for an Orthodox burial, and Perri’s resolve to honor it, is especially interesting given that it necessarily meant that Perri, as a gentile, could never be buried alongside his partner. Perhaps he already had plans to be buried in a Catholic cemetery, one in which Starkman, as a Jew, might not have desired or been allowed entry. It is also possible that the couple had simply accepted that, despite being self-declared soul mates in life (routine discord and cheating aside), their differing religions would necessarily part them in death. Given the lack of personal records and Perri’s eventual disappearance, we may never know where he chose to be buried, but we do know that Perri, and presumably Starkman, were willing to honour her Judaism in death, even though the choice of an Orthodox cemetery would render their separation everlasting.⁷⁵

Even with Starkman’s unaffiliated and disreputable status within the Jewish community, and associated predictions that at the funeral “there will be few Jews present,” her burial in Ohev Zedek necessarily meant that Hamilton Jews were invested

in the ceremony.⁷⁶ Amidst a sea of Italians, non-Italians, and Anglo-Saxons, Jews visited both the house and cemetery.⁷⁷ They seemed to belong to one of three groups: mourners (who included Starkman's adult daughters and their husbands, but not her parents or siblings), curious community members, or guardians of Jewish ritual.⁷⁸ A woman in this last group, for example, obscured a floral crucifix that had been prominently displayed on the open casket.⁷⁹ Some "Jewish women ... were softly wailing," while others, perhaps bothered by the open coffin or the enormous crowds, sat in a circle in the dining room.⁸⁰ Although they lingered in separate rooms from the Italian cohort, they all converged as Perri entered the living room and the funeral began.⁸¹ But he drew a clear distinction between the two groups, socializing only with Italians in the first two days after the murder, and ensuring that visitors knew that "English-speaking callers [non-Italians] were not allowed to speak to Mr. Perri."⁸² Whether this tactic was a way to bring him comfort, avoid Jews, or evade the police or press is difficult to know.

Despite the presence of a presiding rabbi and interment at an Orthodox Jewish gravesite (albeit with numerous irregularities), Starkman's funeral in many crucial ways did not adhere to commonly practiced Jewish law and custom. First, her funeral produced crushing crowds; as such, it was the largest spectacle that the city of Hamilton had ever witnessed.⁸³ Since the Thursday night before the Sunday service, ten thousand people had viewed her casket on display in the Perri living room, and even toured the nearby garage where she was killed; more than twenty thousand "sight-seers" lined the streets as the cortege made its way to the cemetery.⁸⁴ It was Perri himself who turned the weekend into "a public pageant."⁸⁵ At his behest, "thousands and thousands ... had been invited" to the funeral and interment, with free cabs made available "for all who wanted them," a plan that invited overcrowding, traffic snarls, trash, and property damage in the stately neighborhood of his home and on the way to and inside the graveyard.⁸⁶

Public funerals teeming with spectators were not unknown to Jews, but they were only for the most distinguished and learned figures. According to Goren, public funerals experienced brief popularity in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century when Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe transplanted the longstanding custom of funerary processions.⁸⁷ For the community, they affirmed the qualities of the deceased, group solidarity, and with any luck, Gentile compassion.⁸⁸ For the attendee, presence at a public funeral was a personal and religious obligation. It afforded the opportunity to accompany, assist, and honour the dead, the ultimate caring and holy gestures. But, as in Europe, these mass events were generally reserved for revered rabbis, scholars, and civic leaders.⁸⁹ Rabbi Jacob Joseph, for example, whose mass funeral in New York City in 1902 drew more than fifty thousand people, was "the most eminent East European rabbi in America at the time of his death."⁹⁰

By the 1920s and 1930s, public Jewish funerals fell into decline. This shift was attributable to fewer immigrant Jewish enclaves that fostered communal gathering, a diminishing Yiddish press that announced Jewish community milestones, and the rise of privacy as a new priority of the growing Jewish middle class.⁹¹ Even with immigrant tradition waning for the Hamilton Jewish community, Bessie Starkman's infamy and criminality were certainly not worthy of a mass collective outpouring, and its members would have resisted commemorating her in this way.

Toronto Daily Star ace reporter Frederick Griffin, who attended the Starkman funeral, recorded and rebuked the misconduct of the masses in graphic detail.⁹² Described as the newspaper's "most experienced and gifted news man," Griffin, who died in 1946 at the age of fifty-six, travelled the world covering many international and high-profile stories, most notably related to the fledgling Soviet Union and the Second World War. He was eulogized in the *New York Times* as a veteran journalist whose "by-line became one of the best known in Canada" and in 1977, he would be inducted into the Canadian News Hall of Fame.⁹³ In his vivid and evocative piece, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," the most comprehensive and cited account of the funeral, Griffin reported on the throngs swarming the Starkman home and gravesite. He noted that in the hours before the funeral, five thousand people outside the house "milled and reared in their eagerness to get in and look."⁹⁴ "The roar of them," he continued, "came in like the shouting of impatient bleacherites wanting the gates opened for the big game. Police and husky Italian men held the door forcibly against their entry."⁹⁵

As the service commenced and the commotion outside intensified, people were "pushing and clamoring to enter." When the police endeavored to clear the veranda, "there was scuffling, shoving, and shouting."⁹⁶ Throughout the upheaval, Rabbi Freund competed with the outside clatter and repeated cries for "Order!"⁹⁷ After the ceremony, when the casket was carried out to the awaiting hearse, Griffin recalled that "there was an animal sound from the mob, a kind of anticipatory 'Ah!.. like the sound I remember hearing a Mexican mob make at a bull fight."⁹⁸ As the cortege readied to move, "People swarmed on the street, on the sidewalks, on the lawns. People were on the tops of the funeral cars, up trees, on verandas, on the very roofs of the verandas."⁹⁹ Indeed, Griffin noted that the few police at the scene "were helpless to handle the mob."¹⁰⁰ As the cortege slowly wound the four miles up the escarpment to the cemetery, over twenty thousand onlookers lined the streets, many unaware that once on the mountain the hearse broke down and had to be towed by a police officer the rest of the way.¹⁰¹ Finally there, the tuxedoed pallbearers "had literally to fight their way to the grave," battling the oppressive heat and the "open-air riot" in which hundreds of people "thronged around, trampling over graves, defiling this holy place of Jewish dead."¹⁰² Griffin reported that

The crowd, avid for a close-up [view of the grave], would not give way. The proceedings grew grotesque. There was loud shouting. Around the grave there was literally a fight as people struggled to get close. There was pushing and shoving such as you'd see in a football scrum, the angry shouts of men, the attempts of the cemetery workers to make a clear space, the cries of women being pushed and hurt, the wailing of the female mourners. It was a miniature bedlam.... I have never seen anything so pitifully terrible.¹⁰³

The *Globe* stated ominously that "a strange terror gripped the crowd, and panic was imminent."¹⁰⁴



Rocco Perri at Bessi Starkman's funeral, August 1930. Source: Local History and Archives, Hamilton Public Library.

In the midst of the chaos, Starkman's adult daughters Gertrude and Lily, as well as Rocco, became casualties of the crowd. As principal mourners who sought proximity to the casket, they attempted to push through the mob, but were jostled to the point of tears and panic. Their ill-treatment had begun at the house when the hordes had followed the casket's path to the hearse: the daughters "felt themselves crushed and borne along by the clamoring people who pressed to get close to the hearse and Perri."¹⁰⁵ At the cemetery, Gertrude and Lily, both overcome by emotion, the heat, and the uncivil throngs, collapsed, which provoked other women to shriek and faint amidst complete "pandemonium."¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Perri, who reached the graveside as

Starkman's coffin descended below ground, nearly fell over from inconsolable sorrow, and had to be helped into his car and administered water.¹⁰⁷ The chaotic scene finally ended, but not before a discarded cigarette ignited parched grass just outside the cemetery.¹⁰⁸

It is quite possible that the crowding, screaming, weeping, and fainting evident at the cemetery were not only sincere expressions of grief, but the dramatics of professional mourners.¹⁰⁹ Common in Italy and among late-nineteenth century Italian immigrants, they comprised one aspect of a strategy that called for “embellishment” to affirm the social standing and popularity of mourning families and the deceased.¹¹⁰ In particular, female mourners were hired by bereaved families to wail at funerals in order to increase attendance, both highlighting and augmenting the community's sense of anguish, and compensating for the restrained reactions of men.¹¹¹

Perri might have deemed hiring mourners as a necessary tactic to optimize attendance and emotional outpouring. Bessie was both an Italian and Jewish outsider, had few family members present, was generally disliked (despite Perri's declarations to the contrary), and was resented in mob circles.¹¹² Professional mourners, remunerated for their contribution to Starkman's funeral through their presence at an historic event, proximity to celebrity, and complimentary cab rides, help explain why thousands showed up and grieved so expressively. Indeed, Griffin wrote that he had “never seen such an extreme manifestation of distress and woe.”¹¹³ In the end, “the crowd that came to witness the spectacle became itself the spectacle.”¹¹⁴

Even with his impulse to attract mourners, Perri insisted that “my people, the Italian people, worshipped her and loved her,” and he set the stage for their collective expression of adulation.¹¹⁵ As per Italian custom, her corpse was prepared for a grand three-day viewing in her home by the massive crowds. There, Starkman “had lain in state, like a princess,” and looked “like a bride.”¹¹⁶ Embalming was strictly forbidden by Jewish law and was not common at the time.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, it might have well been administered due to the stifling August heat, the protracted viewing period, and the Italian acceptance of the practice by the 1940s.¹¹⁸ It certainly would have helped stop any leakage from her wounds, and would have served to beautify her, upholding her as an object of admiration.¹¹⁹ The top of the casket lid was kept open, a lamp was attached to the lid, and silver candle sticks were lit on a bier by her head for optimal viewing.¹²⁰ Starkman's face “showed softly” through a layer of white laced netting arranged over it: “The general effect was a serene whiteness. Mrs. Perri's face, pale, well-cut, strong, as though carved in stone, showed—though the hair was hidden—from a bed of pure white silk...”¹²¹ This angelic tableau cast Starkman in a most flattering way, temporarily distracting visitors from the gore of her death and her rapacious character.¹²²

By Jewish standards this process of preservation and beautification signaled a lack of dignity for the body. According to Jewish law, in order for the body to leave the world as natural and pure as it arrived, it undergoes a *tahara* (purification), the meticulous, methodical cleaning and washing performed by the *chevra kadishah* (holy burial society), a committee of observant Jewish women (if the body is female) assigned for this function. The *tahara* consists of particular rules that govern the nature and ordering of the cleaning, both physical and symbolic, and includes the shared, successive pouring of 22.7 litres of water over the head and body, recitation of Hebrew prayers, and the dressing of the body in its vestments.¹²³ Made of clean white cotton, muslin, or linen, the simple, standardized shroud represents "the democracy of death," erasing the status and class distinctions denoted by clothing, and fabricated without pockets to signify the dignity of the soul over material wealth.¹²⁴ The *tahara* is not merely for the purpose of pragmatism or hygiene, but is "the age-old Jewish manner of showing respect for the dead," and "an absolute requirement of Jewish law."¹²⁵ With the completion of the *tahara*, the body, unadorned by jewelry and without worldly possessions, is placed in a simple, unlined coffin, which is constructed entirely of wood (although metal handles and nails may be used) in order that the natural decomposition of the body and its reunion with the earth are neither hastened nor impeded; accordingly, the coffin interior offers no added luxury.¹²⁶ After the deceased is arranged in the casket, its lid remains closed so the body can retain its integrity and privacy.¹²⁷ It is attended by a fellow Jew (*shomer* [male] or *shomeret* [female]) who prior to the funeral is tasked with overseeing its safety and comforting its disquieted soul through the recitation of psalms. The body is then buried in a timely manner, preferably within twenty-four hours of death.¹²⁸

Starkman's body was granted some of these rites, but not the all-important *tahara*.¹²⁹ It was readied in some fashion by the *chevra kadishah*—according to a police report, the wife of Orthodox rabbi Charles Rosen "was one of the women who dressed Bessie and prepared her for burial."¹³⁰ Despite Bessie's love of diamonds, her body donned no jewelry.¹³¹ Rabbi Rosen, who was the father of Bessie's close friend Mae, served as *shomer*, sitting with the body for hours in the Perri home on the Friday before the Sunday funeral.¹³² The body did not undergo the sacred ritual of *tahara*, however, possibly for reasons related to the manner of death. First, the *chevra kadishah* might have chosen to forsake the rite due to those conditions for which a *tahara* is deemed inappropriate: as a shooting victim with serious neck and torso injuries, Starkman's wounds might have been too extensive and gruesome to clean and mend properly. In this case, the cleaning would have been deemed an indignity to the body, and it would have simply been wrapped in, or placed beneath, the shroud.¹³³ As well, a *tahara* might have been waived so that blood that flowed from her wounds after death, as well as her bloody clothes, could be buried with her, keeping blood and body together to make the latter more whole.¹³⁴ An additional possibility is that Perri might have refused a *tahara* because he wanted the body embalmed and prepared for display and

viewing according to Italian Catholic tradition. Since there were legitimate reasons to forgo the *tahara*, as outlined above, Rabbi Freund might have allowed Perri his way in having his wife's body readied for onlookers.

It must have been somewhat of a relief to the Rabbi when finally, at two o'clock in the afternoon on the day of the funeral, he was able to close the casket lid and conceal Starkman's face.¹³⁵ He was likely contemplating the Jewish precept that a clear line must be drawn "between *reverence* for the dead and *worship* of the dead."¹³⁶ Visitation and wakes, according to Jewish custom, serve to delay prompt burial, deprive the body of privacy and dignity, and help disguise the reality of death, all of which prolong the grief of the mourners.¹³⁷ Because ensuring the physical and spiritual integrity of the body remains the priority before a timely burial, the emotional needs of the mourners cannot be fully met until interment.¹³⁸ Thus, the sooner the body is buried, the sooner the body finds peace. The truth of death sets in, and meaningful grieving can begin.

The shift of venue from the Perri living room to the cemetery, however, gave rise to a delay in getting Starkman buried. For some reason, the coffin was carried into the small shed on the grounds, possibly reserved for *tahara*, but as Starkman's body was already "prepared," there was no apparent need to bring the casket inside.¹³⁹ In a highly unusual move by Jewish standards, the lid was reopened, perhaps so the Jewish women could confirm that the body was indeed there after the harrowing transport. Shockingly, the pallbearers, who were all Italian Catholics but who, according to Jewish law, should have been Jewish men, took this opportunity to make the sign of the cross.¹⁴⁰ Griffin reported that at this point, "there was considerable argument in loud voices around the casket. The Jews who seemed to have taken charge when it entered the cemetery seemed angry."¹⁴¹ After urgent pleas directed at the pallbearers to move the coffin to the grave, likely by the Jewish onlookers aghast at the cross-making, the men carried it out of the shed through the crowds, and at four o'clock the ornate casket was lowered into a simple wooden box.¹⁴² This symbolic act was likely meant to render the prohibited metal casket more in keeping with the dictates of the cemetery.¹⁴³

Along with supplying spectators and adulation, Perri also ensured that Starkman's funeral was characterized by opulence. Elizabeth Mathias writes that there existed a rivalry among immigrant Italians who sought to spend a tidy sum on family funerals in order to express their devotion to the deceased through an extravagant public display.¹⁴⁴ Starkman's casket, for example, similar to that of Italian-American actor Rudolph Valentino, was "massive," constructed of bronze and silver steel, and reportedly cost \$3,000.¹⁴⁵ The Italian Royal Marine Band played as it was transported to the cemetery.¹⁴⁶ The flower arrangements, although sparse at first, were characteristically Italian in their lavishness and abundance.¹⁴⁷ According to Jewish custom, flowers are an ornamental distraction that helps temper the gravity of death, and

as such they are not part of the Jewish funerary tradition.¹⁴⁸ This difference became another contentious issue between cultures in the first hours of the viewing: Italian visitors “surprised at the absence of floral tributes,” soon ensured that the coffin was blanketed by them in what Griffin called “the flower-choked room.”¹⁴⁹ In his article, Griffin exclaims “What flowers! I never saw anything equal to them ... they were magnificent.”¹⁵⁰ They were arranged into more than one hundred wreaths, into a chair atop the coffin, and into a harp “as tall as a small man,” and “flowed up and around the coffin and up the walls until they were the height of the candle light fixtures.”¹⁵¹ For the cortege, twelve convertible cars were on hand just to transport the flowers, but Jewish organizers did not welcome the adornments inside the cemetery, and they were abandoned outside its gates.¹⁵² The opulence of the funeral’s coffin and flowers would be capped off a year later with the unveiling of the enormous tombstone, which Perri, familiar with the Jewish aversion to floral tributes around death, inappropriately decorated with “ornate wreaths.”¹⁵³

In recounting the grim details of the Starkman funeral and burial, the gentile Griffin expressed reverence for Judaism. When he learned that she was buried “by the fence, by the edge of the orthodox, beneath a withered tree of thorns,” he reflected on “what warmth she might have had from sleeping completely within the ranks of her race and faith.”¹⁵⁴ He was even consoled by the fact that “At least she was buried with a show of the ancient ritual in consecrated ground in the little dishevelled [sic] cemetery of Ereve Zedeck [sic]...”¹⁵⁵

In the years since Griffin’s account, several Starkman biographers have misread or misunderstood the significance of Jewish funerary and burial rituals. Some have erroneously implied that Bessie Starkman’s ceremony arrived at a cultural “compromise” of Orthodox Jewish and Italian Catholic traditions, not appreciating that the latter potentially dishonoured the former (and vice versa).¹⁵⁶ Moreover, journalist Antonio Nicaso mistakenly asserts that, at the cemetery, the rabbi concluded the Kaddish by saying the Arabic “Salàm alèicom ... Peace be with you”; in fact, the rabbi would have said “shalom aleichem,” the comparable Hebrew expression. Nicaso also notes that a spectator placed a menorah on Starkman’s coffin without commenting on the impropriety and peculiarity of adorning it in this way.¹⁵⁷

Most recently, journalist Trevor Cole, expresses some contempt for the Jewish community concerning its cold treatment of Rocco Perri after Bessie’s death. He maintains that “Rocco wanted to do right by Bessie” by giving her “a traditional Jewish burial,” and provides no analysis of how Perri himself subverted these efforts or how Jewish law and custom were violated.¹⁵⁸ Instead, Cole declares that due to unsympathetic Jewish leaders, Perri “seemed to be thwarted at every turn.”¹⁵⁹ He points to them refusing her burial, “even when he [Perri] offered a thousand dollars to

whichever synagogue would accept her.” He then notes that Ohev Zedek Cemetery “finally ... relented” and provided “a small plot.”¹⁶⁰ That Hamilton’s four synagogues were united in their reluctance to accept Perri’s offer, despite their divergent religious practice and the enticing imbursement, indicates the extent to which they collectively sought to uphold Jewish law and ritual and distance themselves from the criminality in which the Perris were mired.¹⁶¹ Moreover, Cole’s assertion that Starkman was only afforded a small plot defies common sense: any plot must accommodate the coffin buried there, and, according to the undertaker, her elaborate casket was “full couch length.”¹⁶²

Perri ensured that his vision for the funeral of Bessie Starkman prevailed. Although he committed to a rabbi officiant and to her interment in an Orthodox Jewish cemetery, almost everything about the funeral reflected his preferences, variously inspired by his love for Bessie, Italian tradition and custom, respect and celebrity, and family and gangland one-upmanship. Given her fondness for status, furs, and jewels, as well as her affinity for Italian culture, Starkman might have endorsed the crowds, adulation, and opulence that Perri delivered. In the end, however, the funeral was Perri’s show, a spectacle that clashed with the Jewish ritual he vowed to honour, and that was less about her than about the worship of her.¹⁶³ Indeed, the display likely did little to enhance the image of Starkman for whom reverence and mourning were sincere among some, but contrived and disingenuous among others. In some important ways, the funeral and burial of Bessie Starkman demonstrated her sustained and undeniable connection to Judaism. As Griffin reflected, “It was Bessie the daughter of Simon, the Jew, and not Bessie, the partner of Rocco Perri, the Italian, whom the young rabbi buried.”¹⁶⁴ Ultimately, however, the “vulgar spectacle” was far more revealing of Rocco Perri’s own sensibilities, ego, and showmanship.¹⁶⁵

Monda Halpern is a professor of history at the University of Western Ontario. She specializes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century North American women’s history and Jewish history. Halpern is the author of *And on That Farm He Had a Wife: Ontario Farm Women and Feminism, 1900–1970* (McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2001) and *Alice in Shandehland: Scandal and Scorn in the Edelson/Horwitz Murder Case* (McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2015). She is currently writing a book on Canadian Jewish mob boss Bessie Starkman.

1

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2

As Starkman was apparently never divorced from her husband Harry Toben, Rocco and Bessie were not legally married; however, the public, press, and police commonly perceived them as husband and wife or as common-law spouses and routinely addressed her as Mrs. Perri.

3

Rose Keefe, *Bessie Perri: Queen of the Bootleggers* (np: Absolute Crime Books, 2014), 11.

4

Robin Rowland, "Starkman, Besha (Tobin)," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 15 (2005), http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/starkman_besha_15E.html. See, moreover, Keefe, *Bessie Perri*, 14; Danny Kucharsky, "Bessie Starkman," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, [https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/bessie-starkman#:~:text=Besha%20\(Bessie\)%20Starkman%20\(Perri,high%2Dprofile%20female%20crime%20boss](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/bessie-starkman#:~:text=Besha%20(Bessie)%20Starkman%20(Perri,high%2Dprofile%20female%20crime%20boss).

5

"Bessie Perri 'Dead' 17 Years to her Own Family," *Toronto Star*, August 15, 1930, 1; "At Perri Funeral," *The Globe*, August 18, 1930, 2.

6

"Bessie Perri 'Dead' 17 Years to her Own Family," 1. Starkman's siblings disowned Bessie for leaving her husband and children and running off with the Italian Catholic Perri. Jewish law and tradition dictate that Jews marry within the faith, a precept that held strong in the early twentieth century and that tore apart families when it was violated. See, for example, David Kirshenbaum, *Mixed Marriage and the Jewish Future* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1958).

7

Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921*, "Population."

8

James Dubro and Robin F. Rowland, *King of the Mob: Rocco Perri and the Women Who Ran His Rackets* (Markham: Penguin Books, 1987), 2.

9

This article is in no way meant to disparage Italian Catholic funerary culture and rituals. It examines the Starkman funeral from a traditional Jewish perspective according to its standards and customs and uses them as the point of comparison. As well, it incorporates the impressions of contemporaneous observers, many of whom judged the conduct of both Italians and Jews in an inferior light.

10

Both of these rituals dictated and necessitated adherence to a host of other Jewish laws and customs.

11

Chabad.org, Death and Mourning, "The Basics of the Jewish Funeral," https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/282505/; Elizabeth Mathias, "The Italian-American Funeral: Persistence through Change," *Western Folklore* 33 (January 1974): *passim*.

12

Frederick Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," *Toronto Daily Star*, August 18, 1930, 1, 2.

13

Toben often gets referenced as Tobin. Toben, however, appears on both Bessie's and Harry's tombstones.

14

Rowland, "Starkman, Besha (Tobin)."

15

Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob*, 27.

16

Ibid., 36-47.

17

Ibid., 53.

18

For a chronological list of the couple's criminal exploits and extensive court appearances, see Antonio Nicaso, *Rocco Perri: The Story of Canada's Most Notorious Bootlegger* (Mississauga, ON: Wiley, 2004), 223-42 and 242-44, respectively.

19

Nicaso, *Rocco Perri: The Story of Canada's Most Notorious Bootlegger*, 242-44. Perri was also interned during World War II, ostensibly for being Italian, but also, no doubt, as retribution for general criminal activity that had largely gone unpunished.

20

Ibid., 95-8.

21

Archives of Ontario, Report on Bessie Perri Murder Investigation, RG23-50-2, Microfilm 40-189, letter from John Miller, Inspector C.I.D., Hamilton to Alfred Cuddy, Esq., Asst. Commissioner O.P.P., Parliament Buildings, Toronto, Ontario, 20 August 1930; Library and Archives Canada, RCMP, Box RG18, Vol. 3313A, File – Rocco Perri with Alias, letter from F.W. Zaneth, Detective Sergeant, RCMP to The Officer Commanding, RCMP, Toronto, 25 March 1931.”

22

Library and Archives Canada, RCMP, Box RG18, Vol. 3313A, File – Rocco Perri with Alias, letter from G.L. Jennings, “O” Division, RCMP to The Commissioner, RCMP, Ottawa, 25 March 1931.

23

Bruce Bowden and Roger Hall, “The Impact of Death: An Historical and Archival Reconnaissance into Victorian Ontario,” *Archivaria* 14 (Summer 1982): 96.

24

Arthur Aryeh Goren, “Sacred and Secular: The Place of Public Funerals in the Immigrant Life of American Jews,” *Jewish History*, 8 (1994): 299, 270.

25

Sarah J. Purcell, *Spectacle of Grief: Public Funerals and Memory in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 1-9.

26

Scholar Harry Garlick notes that at a state funeral, the “Assassination [as the cause of death of the deceased] acts as an intensifier” of emotions among the mourners. See Harry Garlick, *The Final Curtain: State Funerals and the Theatre of Power* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), 229. Starkman’s murder was sometimes referred to as an assassina-

tion, a term more indicative of her infamy than of her political prominence. See, for example, Athol Gow, “Bessie Queenly in Death ‘They Got My Pal’ -- Rocco,” *Toronto Daily Star*, August 15, 1930, 1.

27

“Panic Threatened and Blow Struck at Perri Funeral,” *The Globe*, August 18, 1930, 1; Arthur Kiron, “‘Dust and Ashes’: The Funeral and Forgetting of Sabato Morais,” *American Jewish History* 84 (September 1996): 179.

28

Purcell, *Spectacle of Grief*, 4, 5.

29

Ibid., 5.

30

Garlick, *The Final Curtain*, 230.

31

Ibid., 2.

32

Ibid., 2, 5, 6-7, 229.

33

Ibid., 5.

34

Ibid., 230.

35

Sources investigated by Eddie Paul and Eiran Harris, Jewish Public Library, Montreal.

36

The newspaper features three stories. The first article below is an original story with a byline (presumably a pseudonym); the other two stories below offer virtually the same wording and information that appear in the *Toronto Star* (but with more references to Starkman’s Jewishness). See Ontario Jewish Archives, Shamash, “The Tragic End of the Italian “Queen” who was a Jewish Child [born Jewish],” *Yiddisher Journal [Zhurnal]*, August 22, 1930, 4; “Jewish Wife of an Italian Bootlegger King in Murdered,” *Yiddisher Journal [Zhurnal]*, August 15, 1930, 1; “Thirty Thousand People at the Funeral of the Murdered Bessie Perri,” *Yiddisher Journal [Zhurnal]*, August 18, 1930, 1. Sources retrieved by Faye Blum and Menashe Mike Yarkony, Ontario Jewish Archives. Sources translated by Jerrold Landau.

37

Shamash, "The Tragic End of the Italian "Queen" who was a Jewish Child [born Jewish]," 4; "Jewish Wife of an Italian Bootlegger King in Murdered," 1; "Thirty Thousand People at the Funeral of the Murdered Bessie Perri," 1.

38

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 1; "Police Work on Theory Mrs. Perri was Victim of Bootlegging Racket," *Toronto Daily Star*, August 14, 1930, 1.

39

"\$5,000 of Perri's Gold to be Offered as Aid in Search for Slayers," *Toronto Daily Star*, August 16, 1930, 2.

40

"Silicon Valley Jewish History: The Rabbis," *Metroactive*, March 12, 1998, <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/03.12.98/cover/jews2-9810.html>.

41

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2; "Hamilton," *Canadian Jewish Review*, August 19, 1927, 13.

42

"Perri Kept Faith with Daughters of Dead Consort," *Toronto Daily Star*, August 16, 1930, 2; Nicaso, *Rocco Perri*, 141; Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob*, 2; Trevor Cole, *Whiskey King: The Remarkable True Story of Canada's Most Infamous Bootlegger and the Undercover Mountie on his Trail* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2017), 375.

43

"Perri Kept Faith with Daughters of Dead Consort," 2.

44

Hamilton Public Library, Local History and Archives, Levine, Rabbi Samuel CA 1878-1953, Hamilton -- Biography, "Jewish Community Loses Leader in Rabbi Levine," 1953.

45

"Silicon Valley Jewish History: The Rabbis," *Metroactive*.

46

Admin, "Centenarian San Jose Rabbi Optimistic about Jews [sic] Future," *The Jewish News of Northern California*, January 19, 1996,

<http://www.jweekly.com/1996/01/19/centenarian-san-jose-rabbi-optimistic-about-jews-future.html>.

47

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2. The Rabbi recited the standard *El Maleh Rachamim* prayer. See Shamash, "The Tragic End of the Italian "Queen" who was a Jewish Child [born Jewish]," 4. Shamash contends that the Rabbi "delivered a eulogy stressing her praises," but no other story reports this event.

48

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

49

"Panic Threatened and Blow Struck at Perri Funeral," 1.

50

Starkman's Yiddish first name appears on her tombstone. Harry Toben and Bessie were married by an Orthodox officiant, Rabbi M.Z. Levy, in Toronto.

51

The contravention of these laws, however, while undesirable, does not render the entire cemetery "unkosher."

52

Rocco Perri paid two thousand dollars for a plot at Ohev Zedek, a large sum for the time. See "At Perri Funeral," 2. The Hess Street Synagogue might have factored in the cost of anticipated damages to the cemetery if crowds were to converge there.

53

"At Perri Funeral," 2.

54

Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969), 83.

55

"Mrs. Perri's Money to Go to R. Perri," *Hamilton Herald*, August 15, 1930. 56 Shamash, "The Tragic End of the Italian "Queen" who was a Jewish Child [born Jewish]," 4.

57

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 83.

58

Ibid., 38.

59

Ibid., 38-39. Other reasons include references in the bible to the rending of garments and as an expression of anger and sorrow.

60

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 43. Today, the rending of clothes is often substituted with a small black ribbon, sometimes cut, pinned to the clothes in the spot where they would otherwise be torn. See pp. 42-43.

61

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 83-84.

62

Ibid., 83.

63

"At Perri Funeral," 2; Cemetery visit by author, May 23, 2022.

64

"Perri Grave in Center of Ground," *Hamilton Herald*, May 26, 1931, 1; Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob*, 299. According to Jewish custom, the gravestone is erected and revealed to mourners (the "unveiling") approximately one year after the burial.

65

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 188; Mathias, "The Italian-American Funeral," 42, Appendix 2.

66

Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob*, 299. They contend it was family who was responsible for the removal of the letters. It is also possible that they were stolen by vandals.

67

Mathias, "The Italian-American Funeral," 42.

68

It is also possible that the portrait was stolen by vandals.

69

Translation by Dr. William and Rose Klein, London, Ontario.

70

Pessel is a Yiddish name in the same family as Besha, from where the English "Bessie" derives. Shimon is Hebrew for Simon. He was a Kohen, a label worthy of inscription as he was a member of the holiest and most respected of the twelve tribes of Israel.

71

Hamilton possessed four Jewish cemeteries (and all were governed by affiliated synagogues of the same name): Ohev Zedek (Orthodox), established in 1912 on the Hamilton Mountain; Adas Israel Anshe Sfarad (Orthodox), established 1913 in, what is today, Burlington; Beth Jacob (Conservative), established 1887, in, what is today, Burlington; and the Anshe Sholom (Reform), established in 1834 on the Hamilton Mountain, but whose earliest stone dates to the 1850s with the start of the synagogue. For Ohev Zedek and Anshe Sholom, See *Hamilton's Heritage Volume 6: Inventory of Cemeteries and Burial Grounds* (Hamilton: City of Hamilton Planning and Development Department, December 2005), 104, 99. For Adas Israel, see Find A Grave, Adas Israel Cemetery, <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2642505/adas-israel-cemetery>. For Beth Jacob, see Halton-Peel Branch Ontario Genealogical Society, Beth Jacob & Grand Order of Israel, <https://haltonpeel.ogs.on.ca/beth-jacob-grand-order-of-israel/>.

72

Archives of Ontario, Report on Bessie Perri Murder Investigation, letter from John Miller to Alfred Cuddy, 20 August 1930 and Archives of Ontario, Report on Bessie Perri Murder Investigation, RG23-50-2, Microfilm 40-189, letter from John Miller, Inspector C.I.D., Hamilton to Alfred Cuddy, Esq., Asst. Commissioner O.P.P., Parliament Buildings, Toronto, Ontario, no date, 1930.

73

"Perri Kept Faith with Daughters of Dead Consort," 1.

74

Ibid.

75

Perri disappeared from Hamilton in 1944 at the age of 56. Some surmise that he was

murdered by rival mobsters and tossed into Hamilton Bay; others insist that he fled to the United States or Mexico. For various theories regarding how and why he vanished, see Nicaso, *Rocco Perri, 186-91* and Cole, *Whiskey King, 447-51*.

76

"Perri Kept Faith with Daughters of Dead Consort," 1.

77

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

78

Ibid.; "Bessie Perri 'Dead' 17 Years to her Own Family," 1.

79

Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob, 4*.

80

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

81

Ibid.

82

"Mrs. Perri's Money to Go to R. Perri."

83

See, for example, Bill Freeman, *Hamilton: A People's History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 2001), 127; Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob, 276*; Mark McNeil, "Hamilton's Most Notable Funerals," *Hamilton Spectator*, October 29, 2014, <https://www.the.spec.com/news/Hamilton-region/2014/10/29/Hamilton-s-most-notable-funerals>. One source claims that "Her funeral was the largest in Canadian underworld history." See Peter Edwards and Michel Auger, *The Encyclopedia of Canadian Organized Crime: From Captain Kidd to Mom Boucher*, Revised Edition (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2012), 188.

84

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

85

Ibid., 2.

86

"Panic Threatened and Blow Struck at Perri Funeral," 1; Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2; "Mauling Mob at Mrs. Perri's Burial," *Hamilton Herald*, August 18, 1930, 5.

87

Goren, "Sacred and Secular," 298, 270.

88

Ibid., 270.

89

Ibid., 269, 270. There were some notable exceptions, however, such as the 1946 public funeral of Montreal gangster Harry Davis that attracted over 5,000 spectators, a fact that disgusted the Canadian Yiddish newspaper *Keneder Adler*. See Richard Menkis, "In from the Margins: Museums and Narratives of the Canadian Jewish Experience," in David S. Koffman, ed., *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 180. The focus on religious, intellectual, and philanthropic leaders, even with consideration of the occasional gangster, meant that, with few exceptions, only men were deemed worthy of public mourning in the Jewish community. Two rare examples of public funerals for Jewish women are those that took place in New York City for the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in 1911 and for community reformer Mary Siegelstein in 1905. For the latter, see Kiron, "Dust and Ashes": The Funeral and Forgetting of Sabato Morais," 173, fn 68.

90

Goren, "Sacred and Secular," 272. As Rabbi Joseph's chaotic funeral illustrates, public funerals that attract hundreds or thousands of spectators can often grow unruly. The heightened emotions and the jostling for space can contribute to misconduct, as can the presence of curiosity-seekers and troublemakers. Mass funerals don't necessarily result in bedlam, thereby dishonoring the dead, but they often do.

91

Ibid., 270, 298. Goren also attributes the decline in public funerals among Jews to their cultural assimilation in America. See p. 270. Today, Hasids continue to hold public funerals (attended exclusively by the men in their communities) for eminent rabbis. The funerals attract hundreds and even thou-

sands of mourners. See, for example, Jason Silverstein, "Hundreds of Hasidic Jews Gather in Brooklyn for Rabbi's Funeral, Defying Social Distancing Order," *CBS News*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-hasidic-jews-rabbi-funeral-brooklyn-social-distancing/>.

92

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2. In addition to Griffin's piece on the funeral, Athol Gow's reporting for the *Toronto Daily Star* distinguished itself in its intimate coverage of Perri and Starkman. *Star* reporters proved especially aggressive and thorough, although all of the Toronto and Hamilton newspapers actively reported on the couple when it confronted criminal accusations or charges or with the death/murder of a member of its inner circle.

93

Stephen Shaw, "War Seen Through a Writer's Eyes," *Haliburton County Echo*, May 2, 1995; "Interest in Soviet at Peak as Star Man Enters Russia," *Toronto Daily Star*, May 16, 1932; "Frederick Griffin, War Reporter, 56," *New York Times*, January 16, 1946, 21. For a detailed description of Griffin's coverage of the Soviet Union, see Kevin Plummer, "Historicist: A Toronto Journalist Reports from the USSR in 1932," *Torontoist* (August 22, 2015), <https://torontoist.com/2015/08/historicist-a-toronto-journalist-in-the-land-of-the-soviets/>.

94

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

95

Ibid.

96

Ibid.

97

Ibid.

98

Ibid.

99

Ibid.

100

Ibid.

101

Ibid.; "Perri Kept Faith with Daughters of Dead Consort," 2. In Hamilton, "the mountain" is colloquially used as a name for the escarpment.

102

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2. Shamash of the *Yiddisher Journal* hinted that the pallbearers were inappropriately overdressed. See Shamash, "The Tragic End of the Italian "Queen" who was a Jewish Child [born Jewish]," 4.

103

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

104

"Panic Threatened and Blow Struck at Perri Funeral," 1.

105

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

106

"Panic Threatened and Blow Struck at Perri Funeral," 1; Ibid.

107

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

108

Ibid.; Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob*, 9.

109

Mathias, "The Italian-American Funeral," Appendix 2.

110

Ibid., 41.

111

Marilyn A. Mendoza, "Professional Mourners: An Ancient Tradition," *Psychology Today* (February 15, 2018), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/understanding-grief/201802/professional-mourners-ancient-tradition>. Perri's overt grief might not have been in keeping with expectations related to male stoicism, but it was consistent with the drama that was often expected at Italian funerals.

112

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2. Starkman's two daughters and their husbands were the only mourners from her immediate family; Nicaso, *Rocco Perri*, 136.

113

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

114

Cornelia D. J. Pearsall, "Burying the Duke: Victorian Mourning and the Funeral of the Duke of Wellington," *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1999): 375. This sentiment appears in "Panic Threatened and Blow Struck at Perri Funeral," 2: "they came ... to see – and to be seen."

115

Cole, *Whiskey King*, 374.

116

Mathias, "The Italian-American Funeral," 43; Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2; Gow, "Bessie Queenly in Death 'They Got My Pal' -- Rocco," 1.

117

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 14.

118

For the reference to Italian embalming, see Mathias, "The Italian-American Funeral," 43.

119

"Modern Embalming," Online Exhibit, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, <https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/>.

120

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

121

Ibid.

122

Gow, "Bessie Queenly in Death 'They Got My Pal'—Rocco," 1.

123

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 6-7, 244-45.

124

Ibid., 7.

125

Ibid.

126

Ibid., 17.

127

Ibid., 27-28.

128

Ibid., 18-19. Potentially, Starkman's burial could have also been delayed by the Sabbath (Friday sundown to Saturday sundown) when funerals are not allowed. Typically, rabbis would endeavour to get a person who died on a Wednesday buried prior to the Sabbath.

129

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

130

Archives of Ontario, Report on Bessie Perri Murder Investigation, letter from John Miller to Alfred Cuddy, 20 August 1930.

131

Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob*, 260; "Panic Threatened and Blow Struck at Perri Funeral," 2. Dubrow and Rowland write that when Starkman was killed, she was "draped with the expensive jewellery she always wore." Some claim that she was buried wearing diamonds, although this practise would not have been acceptable by Orthodox standards. See, for example, "Thirty Thousand People at the Funeral of the Murdered Bessie Perri," 1 or Gord Steinke, *Mobsters & Rumrunners of Canada: Crossing the Line* (Edmonton: Folklore Publishing, 2003), 107.

132

Archives of Ontario, Report on Bessie Perri Murder Investigation, RG23-50-2, Microfilm 40-189, letter from John Miller, Inspector C.I.D., Hamilton to Alfred Cuddy, Esq., Asst. Commissioner O.P.P., Parliament Buildings, Toronto, Ontario, 22 August 1930. Trevor Cole mistakenly cites Rabbi Levine as Mae Rosen's father. See Cole, *Whiskey King*, 355 and 375. Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 35; Archives of Ontario, Report on Bessie Perri Murder Investigation, letter from John Miller to Alfred Cuddy, 22 August 1930. It is unusual that Rosen served as *shomer* as it is customary for a man to sit with a deceased male and a woman to sit with a deceased female. It is possible that Perri preferred the

prestige of a rabbi safeguarding his wife's body or that the Jewish leadership was reluctant to send a woman from their community to be among the criminal element in the Perri home.

133

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 244. Hamilton's Brown Brothers Undertakers assured reporter Athol Gow that Starkman "is to be buried in a white shroud just like any other member of the Hebrew faith." As noted, however, she might have been buried with the shroud rather than in it. See Gow, "Bessie Queenly in Death 'They Got My Pal' – Rocco," 2.

134

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 244; Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *A Code of Jewish Ethics, Volume 2: Love Your Neighbor as Yourself* (New York: Random House, 2009), 106-107.

135

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 1.

136

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 27.

137

Ibid., 27-35.

138

Ibid., 28

139

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

140

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 59; Ibid.

141

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

142

Ibid.

143

Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob*, 9.

144

Mathias, "The Italian-American Funeral," 40.

145

Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob*, 3; Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

146

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

147

See Mathias, "The Italian-American Funeral," Appendix 1, Appendix 2.

148

Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 18.

149

"Perri Kept Faith with Daughters of Dead Consort," 2; Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 1.

150

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

151

Ibid. The chair flower arrangement symbolizes a place for the deceased in heaven. See Mathias, "The Italian-American Funeral," Appendix 1, Appendix 2.

152

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

153

Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob*, 299.

154

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

155

Ibid.

156

See, for example, Dubrow and Rowland, *King of the Mob*, 9, and Nicaso, *Rocco Perri*, 143.

157

Nicaso, *Rocco Perri*, 143.

158

Cole, *Whiskey King*, 375.

159

Ibid.

160

Ibid.

161

"At Perri Funeral," *The Globe*, August 18, 1930, 2.

162

Gow, "Bessie Queenly in Death 'They Got My Pal' – Rocco," 2.

163

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2; Pearsall, "Burying the Duke," 376.

164

Griffin, "Grotesque Ceremony Becomes Free-For-All of Morbid Curiosity," 2.

165

"Panic Threatened and Blow Struck at Perri Funeral," 1.