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Every Stone Has a Story
Bessie Perri—Queen of the Bootleggers

By Steven Brock

One of the initiatives our society has undertaken over the past few years is to photograph, translate, and index each and every matzaveh (Jewish tombstone) in the Hamilton area. The purpose of this is to contribute this data to a worldwide Jewish database of burial data.

As I walked with my camera upon rows and rows of graves through the various Hamilton cemeteries, I couldn't help but think that every person buried within had an individual life with hopes, dreams, achievements, setbacks, happiness, sadness, joy and tragedy. Each person had their own unique story.

Within Hamilton's rich Jewish history there is no lack of fascinating characters who have carved out the history and folklore of our community. Among the most interesting characters that ever ran amok in this town was **Besha (Bessie) Starkman Perri**.



Besha Starkman was born in Poland in 1889 and came to Toronto with her parents in the closing years of the 19th century. Like many of the thousands of poor Jews, they settled in St. John's Ward, an overcrowded neighbourhood which became home to many immigrants. Bessie, as she became known, soon married a bakery deliveryman by the name of Harry Toben. Together they had two daughters.

In 1912, Harry and Bessie took in an Italian boarder named Rocco Perri. Bessie quickly fell for the charming Perri, and together they ran off to St. Catharines, abandoning her family in Toronto. After four years of working on the Welland Canal construction project, Rocco was laid off, and the couple relocated to Hamilton. Working as a salesman for a local pasta company did not keep Perri and Starkman in the lifestyle they desired and they soon took advantage of a unique opportunity.

In 1916, as Canada was in the throes of World War I, Ontario's Conservative Premier William Hearst enacted the Ontario Temperance Act (OTA). Like Prohibition in the U.S. during the 1920's and early 1930's, the OTA made possession of liquor and beer outside one's home illegal. Although one could keep a "cellar supply" for one's own consumption, it became illegal to sell an individual "drink". Overnight, all bars, taverns, clubs and liquor stores were shut down.

With Rocco's charisma and connections, along with Bessie's intelligence and ruthless ambition, the couple soon became the largest source of contraband liquor in Hamilton. With the declaration of total alcohol prohibition in Canada on December 23rd 1917 and in the United States in 1919, the Perris established themselves as Canada's "King of the Bootleggers". While Bessie never forgot that Rocco was the "Boss", it became common

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knowledge that she was in fact the brains of the operation – handling the money, bookkeeping and day-to-day business.

Together they built an organized crime syndicate that was reported to be grossing a million dollars a year – close to \$30 million in today's money – expanding into bookmaking and narcotics trafficking. During a time where women – as a rule – were not permitted to participate in any aspect of mob business, Bessie was not only openly known as Rocco's second in command, she had also earned the respect of the other gang members. Over time, the Perris became local celebrities, granting interviews and generally holding court in the lavish Hamilton mansion they purchased at 166 Bay Street South.

On August 13, 1930, Rocco and Bessie were returning home from an evening out with friends. At about 11:15 pm, Rocco drove the car into their garage which sided onto Bold Street. As Bessie got out of the car and headed for the garage light switch, she was struck with a shotgun blast in the neck and abdomen. A second shot rang out and a car fled the scene. Rocco ran to Bessie's side but she was already dead. Neighbours reported hearing Rocco yelling, "My girl has been shot!" Police later found two weapons near the garage, but both had been wiped clean of fingerprints.

Bessie's funeral on August 15th was the most extravagant in Hamilton history. Over ten thousand people crowded the cemetery and later the Bay Street mansion. Bessie was buried in the Ohev Zedek cemetery on Upper James Street. Ironically, the name Ohev Zedek is Hebrew for "Lovers of Justice". Her large but non-descript gravestone includes the names Toben and Starkman, but makes no mention of Perri.



Close-up of removed surname

However upon closer examination, you can see that the five raised letters of her "common-law" surname have been removed from the inscription.

There is a tale in local folklore which may or may not be true, that illustrates Rocco's displeasure with the location of Bessie's grave. Because she had abandoned her family and renounced her religion in order to run off with the non-Jewish Perri, the synagogue would only let her be buried in the far rear corner of the cemetery. A few years after her death, Rocco purchased the lot adjacent to the rear of the Upper James site and donated it to the Shul. Ohev Zedek then used the donated site to expand the size of their rapidly filling burial grounds and Bessie's final resting place is now closer to the center of the graveyard.

While many theories circulated as to the motive and perpetrators of Bessie's murder, no one was ever arrested, and the case was never solved. Rocco kept the mob going strong, and eventually paired up with another strong Jewish woman, Annie Newman. He was imprisoned during the Second World War, and disappeared for good in 1944. It was widely believed that he had also been murdered and his body hidden, but later accounts implied that he moved to the United States, where he led a low-key life in Massena, New York until his death in 1953. ↪

What We Do

The Jewish Genealogical Society – Hamilton & Area (JGS – H & A) is a non-profit organization run by members for members. The Society is member of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS).

We welcome anyone with an interest in exploring their Jewish roots, regardless of religious affiliation or level of experience. We offer assistance locally as well as through a vast network of sources available through the IAJGS.

Jewish genealogy, like all genealogy, is the search for ancestors and relatives, both living and deceased. Genealogy is also the study of the culture, political conditions, lifestyles, and the history of our ancestors, as well as the shtetls and countries in which they lived.

We offer encouragement, assistance, support and help to begin your search, to find the resources for locating your ancestors, to overcome the roadblocks on your path of discovery, and to celebrate your genealogical victories.

Ownership

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Google Street View Offers Genealogists a New Look at Their Ancestral Homes

By Steven Brock

As amateur and professional genealogists flesh out their family trees and learn more and more about their forefathers, there is a natural desire to visit their ancestral homelands. However, travel opportunities, be they across the globe or even within the country do not always present themselves for a number of reasons. Can you imagine visiting foreign cities and seeing the location where your forefathers lived without leaving your computer monitor?

The software gurus at Google have developed a new application to help you do just that. Google Street View (GSV) is a new feature of Google Maps and Google Earth that provides you with close up street level views of many streets around the world. You can see roads, houses, storefronts, etc. as if you were actually there. GSV provides a 360 degree horizontal and a 290 degree vertical panoramic view of the streets that have been photographed.

Over the past few years, Google cars specially equipped with roof-mounted cameras have been driving up and down every street of selected cities, recording an image every 10 to 20 meters. These images have since been integrated into the on-line Google Maps and Google Earth applications. Once you find a specific location on the map, you can drag a "peg man" icon to that location and (if available) Google will pull up the street view image of that location. From there, you can navigate up or down the street, look up to the sky or down to the road, and rotate all the way around to see the area's entire surroundings as it looked at the time of the photographing (these are not "real time" images).

Google launched this service in May 2007 with 5 cities within the USA. They have been adding cities ever since and have now documented more than 60 American towns and attractions (e.g. Yosemite National Park and Legoland). Then they expanded across the US border and have since posted cities in no less than 15 countries worldwide, including:

- Australia
- Czech Republic
- England
- France
- Holland
- Italy
- Japan
- New Zealand
- Northern Ireland
- Portugal
- Scotland
- Spain
- Switzerland

- Taiwan
- Wales

In addition, on October 7, 2009, Google added sixteen cities in Canada, including Hamilton, all of the GTA, Montreal, Ottawa, Halifax, Calgary and Vancouver.

Using GSV makes it quite easy to find your current home or office, be it on King Street in Hamilton or Front Street in Toronto. The question now becomes: how do I find the home that my great-grandfather lived in back in 1940?

Basically, you still have to use some of the other genealogical resources in our toolbox to determine where your ancestors lived, but once you find that out, it becomes just as easy to see that location as it looks today (or at least when it was photographed over the past 2 years).

How I located my grandfather's 1940 residence

In the days before telephones went into widespread use, most cities published a yearly City Directory. Over the years, these directories and later the telephone books that replaced them were photographed for storage on microfilm and more recently converted to digital images. These days many of them can be accessed via the internet at no charge.

So, I searched out my grandfather Michael Borochovitz in the Montreal directory. Archives Canada offers the Montreal City Directories on-line covering the years from 1842 through to 1977. An extremely easy search engine to these directories can be found on Steve Morse's "One Step" data base.

Searching Borochovitz in the 1939 – 1940 directory, we find:

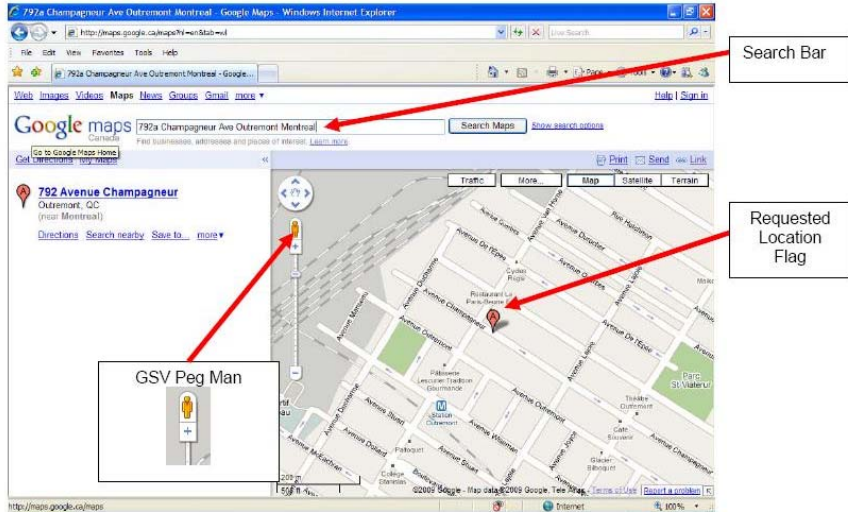
```
- Sam chemist Kik apt 8 5035 Park av  
Borochovitz Israel 746 Wilder av (O)  
" Michael sec treas London Ladies  
Whitewear Ltd 792a Champagneur  
av Outremont  
Borodenko John lab 7209 Waverley
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We can see that there are in fact 2 entries under Borochovitz; Israel (my great-grandfather) and Michael. It states that Michael is Secretary Treasurer of London Ladies Whitewear Ltd and that he lives at 792a Champagneur Avenue in the Outremont district of Montreal.

Now that we know the address, inputting it into the Google Maps search bar, provides a map of the area with a flag as to where on Champagneur, 792 is located.

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(Google Street View- Continued from page 3)



You then drag over the GSV “Peg Man” over to the location flag to get a beautiful street view image of the house. (In fact 792a is on the second floor, but Google won’t tell you that).



Google Street View of 792 Champagneur Ave. Unit “a” is on the 2nd floor

This can be done if your family lived in Hamilton, Toronto, New York or even Prague. More and more locations are being added all the time.

Using today’s modern technology, even if you cannot travel to your ancestral homes, you can still get a good view of what they look like today. ☺

J.G.S.H. Events

- **Nov. 4, 2009, 7:00 PM**
“Documenting the Fate of Victims: Researching the Records of the International Tracing Service”- Michael Goldstein. (*Carpool event*). Shaarei Shomayim Synagogue, 470 Glencairn Avenue, Toronto.
- **Nov. 25, 2009, 7:30 PM** **“The Jewish Hamilton Project”**- Billy Shaffir. The Jewish Hamilton Project made its debut on September 13th. Billy will give us an encore presentation. Temple Anshe Sholom, 215 Cline Ave. N., Hamilton.
- **Dec. 2009 7:30 PM Interactive and Member Specific Family Tree Workshop**
 While we hope to have an internet connection available for use when needed, our main purpose will be to go "around the table" to help participants jump start their individual research. A date in December will be chosen based on availability and interest.
 We are asking for RSVPs to jgshamilton@gmail.com and will choose a venue based on the number of attendees. We hope to have this meeting open to non-members wanting to start their research as well as those who are already members.
- **Jan. 27, 2010----- TBA**
- **Feb. 24, 2010 ----- TBA**
- **March 24, 2010 7:30 PM Changing Borders & the Jewish Communities of Ukraine 1740-1940** - Paul Robert Magocsi. He will address the effects on the inhabitants, an overview of occupations, economic conditions, cultural and political relations.
- **April 21, 2010----- TBA**
- **May 26, 2010----- TBA**
- **June 16, 2010----- TBA**

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