

**Saints and Sinners:
The Underside of American
Jewish History**

by Arthur A. Goren

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And on the first of the intermediate days of Passover in the year 5662 the hevra kadisha of Adath Israel was established; and today, in the year 5671, it numbers 114 members. These saintly men, learned in the law who are also enlightened scholars, perform acts of true kindness conscientiously and uprightly for the glory of the Holy One. And when, heaven forbid, a man or woman of Adath Israel dies, the sexton calls them to carry out the ritual preparation of the body for burial which they do without remuneration to please the Creator. Praised and honored, this hevra kadisha is the finest to be found among the holy congregations of New York.

-from the Book of Chronicles of the
Adath Israel Society of New York,
translated from the Hebrew¹

ס פ ר

דברי הימים

לחברה עדת ישראל

אף נויארק

אשר נתיסדה

עי המיסד רב העלילה

ר אלטער בן ציון שפירא

ביום יד מרחשון תרסב

The title page of the Adath Israel pinkas (official history).

*Sheenie Mike sleeps in a bronze casket.
A kingdom of twelve blocks weeps for him
And so do his mother's wig and his father's old beard.
His orphaned cronies stand on the street corners
Rolling cigarettes with nervous thin fingers*

.

*Terror and guardian, king and commander
from around and around twelve whole blocks,
he lies there, all dandied up, asleep.
His mother's wig bewails yet another virtue:
that he never let his old parents
become a burden to others.
But his father's beard is ashamed in his old age*

.

*that Sheenie Mike, fallen, now sleeps
in a bronze casket.*

*-Yaacov Glatstein, "Sheenie Mike"
translated from the Yiddish²*

Yaacov Glatstein drew his portrait of the death of a Jewish gangster with irony and poignancy: irony, because Sheenie Mike's "orphaned" hoodlum underlings no less than his parents grieved for him; and poignancy, because of the virtue, "that he never let his old parents / become a burden to others." Ambivalence, however, dominated the poet's probe into this dark corner of Jewish immigrant life. The gangster son's filial devotion enabled the pious "half-blind father" to sit "over a tattered book / teaching the children the meaning / of shulchn, a table, and kise, a chair," while a knowing mother haplessly watched "her child . . . quickly scrambling up the ladder / from pickpocket to the very peak / of empire . . ." Bewildered, they mourned the death of their wayward son, a victim of the golden land of opportunity, now laid out in a "bronze casket all dandied up," a desecration of the sacred rite. Glatstein also strikes a note of ambiguity. The "terror" of the neighborhood was also, enigmatically, its "guardian." And finally Sheenie Mike evo-

kes awe: "Did they (the parents) know that under the same roof / lived a king / who ruled mightily / till he fell by an enemy's hand?"³

ard. Published in 1928, "Sheenie Mike" reflects Glatstein's first-hand knowledge of the Jewish underworld of those years. As rewriter, columnist and then city editor of the Yiddish daily, the *Morgen Zhurnal*, he understood the appeal Jewish crime held for his readers. Indeed in the crime-reporting of the Yiddish dailies, like that of the general press, one finds a fascination with the gangster—with his character, motivations, family life, drive for success, and with the sheer drama of combat, of gang against gang and the police against the gangs—a theme we will return to. Thus for contemporary readers, "Sheenie Mike" summoned up the alluring, tragic, and familiar nether world of Jewish crime.

Brief accounts of the demise of two Jewish underworld chiefs, the killing of Kid Dropper [Nathan Kaplan] in August 1923 and the killing of Arnold Rothstein in November 1928, will fill out Glatstein's sparse lines for us.

3" Kaplan's kingdom was never much larger than "twelve square blocks," his royal court a poolroom on Madison Street on the lower East Side. From there, he directed his followers in the gangwars endemic to the New York garment and service industries until he himself was shot dead by a certain Louis Cohen, a member of Little Augie's (Jacob Orgen's) mob, Kaplan's principal rival. Newspaper accounts quoted Kaplan's brother in the defense of the Kid: "I'm telling you the East Side is mourning because he is dead. He was an honorable son and he gave every cent he made to his family and friends. He's been supporting his sick father for years." A Dropper mobster added, "Out in Sullivan Country his father, Morris Kaplan, lies a hopeless paraplytic. Kid Dropper kept him there. They call the Kid a murderer and a thief, but I know what he did for the old man. It's lucky the old man can't read English, ain't it?" His wife, Irene, contributed this character reference: "Why, I could have asked Nathan to scrub the floor or wash dishes for me and he'd have done it. I could have slapped him in the face and he'd never have said a word. He was a real guy and I love him."⁴

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With a relish for detail the press reported the funeral. The estimate of the number present varied from 5,000 to 2,000, as did the estimate of the number of attending policemen (from seventy-five to fifty). Because of the considerable police presence, a rival gang abandoned its plan to send a jazz band into the house adjacent to the funeral parlor in order to disrupt the funeral ceremonies with blasts of jazz music. Nor did the Dropper's henchmen hold

the "parade" they had planned as a show of strength. But someone did call in a false-alarm, and the fire department arrived just as the body was being moved from the funeral home to the hearse. The *Morgen Zhurnal* noted with approval that Kaplan was laid out in the traditional shroud, prayer shawl, and skull-cap, and *The World* reporter observed that detectives frisked the gangsters who attended, but "none brought guns to so solemn an occasion." Motorcycle patrolmen led the funeral procession to Mt. Hebron Cemetery in Flushing where either Reverend Doctor Housman (*Morgen Zhurnal*) or Rabbi Rudolf Grossman (*New York World*) officiated.⁵

Understandably, Arnold Rothstein's murder received even greater coverage than Kid Dropper's. King of New York gamblers and banker for commercial crime, Rothstein moved comfortably in the entertainment, sports and political worlds of the city, far removed from the milieu of the Jewish immigrant neighborhoods. Conservative in his tastes and life style ("he never smoked, drank or fell for women," the *Morgen Zhurnal* wrote), Rothstein lived in an upper Fifth Avenue apartment with offices on West 57th Street in mid-town Manhattan. In the annals of American crime, Rothstein is considered a key figure in transforming crime from petty larceny into big business. Like Sheenie Mike, he was also the son of observant parents and, like Glatstein's creation and Kid Dropper, a devoted son. His father, Abraham, a successful businessman, was a pillar of the New York Orthodox community and gave generously to charity, as did Arnold.⁶ Out of respect for the elder Rothstein, the son received – as reported in the Yiddish press – a "strictly Orthodox funeral" marked by decorum and suppressed grief and limited to two hundred mourners. *Der Tog* matter-of-factly reported one conspicuous infraction of Orthodox tradition: Rothstein's body wrapped in a *talith* was laid in a bronze casket – worth \$5,000 the paper noted – rather than in the simple and inexpensive wooden coffin called for by religious law.⁷ Worthy of note is the fact that not even the freethinking *Forverts* commented on what it might have described as the hypocrisy of the affluent Orthodox. Nor did any of the Yiddish dailies point out the impropriety of a renowned Orthodox rabbi, Leo Jung, delivering the eulogy. The rabbi praised the gambler as a great *ba'al tzedakah* – a philanthropist – who had aided many charitable institutions, and who also gave charity anonymously, the highest form of giving. The *Forverts* stressed Rothstein's involvement in the bitter garment industry strikes of the mid-1920s when gangs of hoodlums under his control hired themselves out to both sides, until he "mediated" a settlement in favor

of the Communist faction of the union.⁸ However the dominant tone of the Yiddish dailies was one of awe if not admiration for Rothstein's business successes, his rise to power, the fame he had won, and his generosity. *Der Tog*, for example, in describing the hospital scene as Rothstein lingered between life and death – the stream of visitors, the high-placed and the low, coming to give blood or express their concern – concluded its report with this thought: "And so it seems that there he lies, not like one who belongs to an inferior class, but a sort of saint." Saints were, of course, good family men. When the *Morgen Zhurnal*, his greatest admirer, reviewed the dead man's life it cavalierly slurred over the existence of a mistress to whom Rothstein willed most of his money, and portrayed him as "a devoted husband."⁹

These episodes of violent death and Jewish funerals return us to the opening epigraph: the founding of the *hevra kadisha*, the holy burial society, established by Adath Israel, the United Hebrew Community of New York, in 1902.

The information on the founding of the *hevra kadisha* is drawn from a remarkable document: the *pinkas*, or official history of Adath Israel, written in the ornate style of classical Hebrew scholarship and in the practiced hand of a *sofer*, a copyist of Scriptures. Written by Yehuda L. Kaletsky, scion of a line of Orthodox Jewish literati and a leading member of the organization, the "Book of Chronicles" breaks off in 1912 with the death of Kaletsky "when no one could be found to fill his place."¹⁰

The saintly virtues the author ascribed to the members of the *hevra kadisha* were in keeping with European tradition. Since attending the dying and burying the dead without personal gain, as Jewish law required, was considered the most exalted of *mitsvas*, only devout and established members of the community were eligible for membership. And because the *hevra kadisha* exemplified the highest form of public service, it also occupied an esteemed place in the structure of Jewish associational life. With this tradition in mind, the founders of Adath Israel were determined to reestablish the communal character of the management of death as a first step towards reviving the Jewish communal order as they had known it.

For the immigrant, ensuring a proper Jewish burial for oneself and one's family acted as a powerful incentive for joining a congregation or benevolent society. Organized for the most part on a *landsmanshaft* basis by Jews originating from the same town or region in Eastern Europe, these associations often provided other forms of assistance as well, such as sick benefits

and interest free loans, which were part of the communal tradition the immigrants brought with them. However, even a cursory look at the immigrant societies reveals the considerable attention they gave to death benefits. These included: an assured grave in a section of a cemetery owned by the organization, the services of the society's *hevra kadisha*, coverage of the minimal funeral expenses, and the presence of members at the home of the deceased, at the funeral, and during the mourning period. Probably, the item that appeared most frequently on the agenda of the *landsmanshaft* societies was the purchase and maintenance of cemetery land.¹¹

This anxiety is understandable when one considers the decommunalization and commercialization of death in America. A family not covered by death benefits faced exorbitant costs in buying a cemetery plot privately and paying a funeral director for his services, or they suffered the humiliation of turning to charity. Sholom Aleichem, the Yiddish author and humorist, writing in New York, lampooned the Jewish funeral. He described a well-off Jewish immigrant taking his wife on a tour of cemeteries to pick out desirable plots for themselves and their children, bargaining over the price, and finally arranging at the "funeral office" the type and cost of the funerals.¹²

In the "old home," the Jewish community handled death as one of its public responsibilities. It recognized a single *hevra kadisha* that had exclusive control of the communal cemetery and met all the needs of the bereaved family. For the destitute, the society provided its services gratis and supported the family during the period of mourning. For others, it used a sliding scale of fees, charging according to the financial status of the deceased, and using the income to support charitable institutions, a practice that gave the *hevra kadisha* considerable communal power. The burial society also applied sanctions against those who had violated communal norms: it assigned the offender a less desirable plot, charged his heirs excessive fees, or in extreme cases punished the culprit with a "donkey's funeral" which entailed burial outside sanctified cemetery land.¹³

Schooled in this tradition, the founders of Adath Israel approached their task. The most formidable obstacle they confronted was the reality of a fragmented immigrant population holding on to narrow parochial loyalties. In a tour de force, Adath Israel's Hebrew chronicler placed this state of affairs in historical context. He recounted the sacred saga of Jewish survival together with the Jewish propensity for schism, from the days of the divided kingdom to modern times. "And when many tens of thousands," the chroni-

cle reads, "fled the darkness and barbarity of Russia and Romania for the asylum which the Guardian of Israel prepared for them in the land of freedom, particularly in its capital, New York, they brought their different factions, customs, and rituals with them. The city became a veritable ingathering of the exiles. Societies, synagogues, and houses of study sprang up in the city like grass in the land. All were distinguished by piety, filled with the glory of Torah, and attaining the splendor of Israel's faith."¹⁴

Yet these achievements, the chronicler declared in the name of Adath Israel, also carried the seeds of chaos:

*"Most of the societies in New York," he wrote, "are named after the city in the homeland from which their founders came. Only those from that particular city or at least those who come from the same region have rights of membership. If one comes from another area, or another state – a Lithuanian to a German or Hungarian society – he will not be accepted, how much more so a person from the sect of Polish hasidim mixing with hasidim from Volyn, and certainly a hasid will be refused by a society of mitnagdim. So, one sect has been estranged from another throughout our history."*¹⁵

What agitated the founders most was the callousness one frequently encountered among the members of these benevolent societies. It was in response to one such case that Alter Ben Zion Shapiro, a leading figure in the Orthodox community at the turn of the century, took the first steps in establishing Adath Israel. Shapiro was present at the meeting of a "certain society" while it was considering the admission of an applicant. The majority were opposed because of the applicant's age – unless he paid the high initiation fee of seventy-five dollars. The account, which appears in a jubilee book, continues:

*"The proposed member was a respectable and learned Jew, formerly quite well to do in Vilna. He was somewhat over sixty years old, and in the best of health During the discussion one heard such remarks as: he is too old; he would be a financial loss; he already stood with both feet in the grave. One member expressed the idea that they already need to warm water (to cleanse the corpse). Meanwhile the unhappy subject sat on the other side of a partition and listened to all this."*¹⁶

Shapiro, who had founded the Hebrew Free Loan Society in 1891, now

moved to combat both evils: the iniquity of sectarianism represented by the myriad of *landsmanshaft* benevolent societies and the absence of true charity that one encountered in these societies. Shapiro proposed establishing an association that would offer Jews irrespective of their origin, or age (no medical examination to be required) or financial means, the essential communal supports, first and foremost death benefits. For a standard fee of three dollars a year members and their families would be assured a burial plot and insured against funeral expenses. Shapiro's strategy, which became Adath Israel's distinguishing feature, was predicated upon the same free enterprise principle that had exacerbated the splintering effect of the transfer to America of Old World loyalties. By undercutting the costs of existing communal services, Adath Israel would create a united community. Large numbers, moreover, would enable the organization to maintain these low costs.

Within a decade of its founding Adath Israel had six thousand members (i. e. heads of families), and had established branches in Harlem and Brownsville. It had also organized its own sick fund, free-loan society, and synagogue. The annual report listed thirty seven institutions and charities as receiving help from the society. A further indication of Adath Israel's communal aspirations was the appointment of the eminent rabbi, scholar and preacher, Gabriel Ze'ev Margolis, as its spiritual leader. Margolis, supported handsomely by the society, established a *bet din*, a rabbinical court, and offered his services without compensation for supervising the kosher meat industry. Although Adath Israel continued to grow and became the largest organization of its kind – eleven thousand families by 1940 – it failed to live up to the ambition incorporated in its legal English name, the "United Hebrew Community of New York." Nevertheless Adath Israel does illustrate the communal energies that were latent in the venerable "holy society."¹⁷

The transition from life to death is a time of public judgment, of determining who the saints are and who the sinners are. In the European traditional society, or in a society where traditional institutions still possessed some influence, the *hevra kadisha*, acting for the community, played a critical role in making this judgment. In a sense, with each burial the community reaffirmed its common values. Through the details of the final rites of passage, the person was placed somewhere on a well-caliberated scale which ran from saint to sinner. The funeral procession of a saintly scholar, rabbi, great benefactor, or important functionary would pause at the synagogue

and other institutions with which the deceased was associated. At each station, and at the cemetery, the deceased would be eulogized by distinguished members of the community, and then interred among the esteemed who had gone to their reward. All who possibly could would accompany a person of such standing from home to cemetery. When common people died, relatives and friends assembled at the dead person's home to accompany the body to the cemetery where a prominent person, not necessarily the rabbi, delivered the eulogy. At the other extreme of the scale, as in the case of an informer's corpse in a small eastern European community, the dead received the most ignoble treatment. He was placed on a garbage wagon, and dragged by a lame horse to the cemetery accompanied by gangs of shouting boys and barking dogs.¹⁸

In the New World, as we have intimated, there was confusion as to who the saints and sinners were. The pious ideals announced by Adath Israel's chronicler did not go much beyond the privatism of immigrant associational life. Outsiders perceived the virtuous founders of the society to be no more than ordinary functionaries, although in Europe they would have been recognized as saintly figures. In the case of Arnold Rothstein, the Yiddish press, an arbiter of sorts of Jewish public opinion, portrayed him in laudatory terms, closer to the saint's end of the scale than the sinner's end, as did an important Orthodox rabbi. Indeed, it is precisely this confusion in categorization that requires further elaboration.

Big Jack Zelig (William Alberts) was Rothstein's contemporary. In the years prior to Zelig's murder in October 1912, both were active figures in New York's underworld, a criminal collusion that linked politicians, police, thieves, racketeers, and purveyors of commercial crime. Rothstein owned and managed gambling casinos. Zelig headed one of the most notorious gangs in the city. In keeping with the times, he protected illicit businesses against their competitors' thugs or the threat of using his own, supplied toughs at election time to intimidate the rival party's followers, and hired out his "gorillas" to commit murder or mayhem as enforcers and labor racketeers. Where Rothstein served a general clientele—his elegant gambling halls in mid-town Manhattan catered to New York's wealthy—Zelig's power base was the Jewish lower East Side.¹⁹

Like Sheenie Mike, Zelig began his criminal career picking pockets and quickly won the reputation of being "one of the best." He was also known as "a very good stone getter (jewelry thief), perhaps one of the best in the

world."²⁰ Both specialties – together with shoplifting, burglary, and extortion – led to forming gangs able to impose order and efficiency among the many hundreds of competing thieves, and capable of obtaining immunity from police harassment. The gang had its fence, lawyer, police and political connections, and its hangouts, where members met to exchange information and to socialize. The arena of this criminal activity – the gang's "territory" – coincided with an ethnic neighborhood. At a critical moment when murders and arrests disrupted the existing hierarchy of gang rule on the lower East Side, Zelig moved in to fill the vacuum and become the "terror" and "commander" of downtown's Jewish underworld, and for some, the quarter's "guardian" as well.²¹

Commercial crime – the systematic provision of illegal goods and services, like gambling, prostitution, and narcotics – was a central part of Zelig's domain. A 1913 report on crime conditions on the lower East Side – prepared for the New York Kehillah, a federation of Jewish organizations – reflects in part the potential wealth and power of that domain. The report listed 914 hangouts, mostly saloons where various forms of gambling took place, 423 disorderly houses, and 374 pool parlors which were fronts for horse betting. Many of the owners, managers, employees, collectors, and protectors of these enterprises were dependent upon Zelig. Fear of Zelig also gripped the small businessmen. In a cynical borrowing of popular ways of raising funds for philanthropic purposes, Zelig and his gang periodically sponsored "benefit" balls. (The name of the sponsoring organization, as it appeared in the press, was, "the Boys of the Avenue Pleasure Association.") His henchmen would force storeowners and peddlers to buy tickets and advertising space in the journals printed for the occasion. At one such affair campaign type pins featuring a photograph of Zelig were distributed or sold. The income, it was announced, was to be allocated to needy members of the association who required bail or legal assistance.²²

While Zelig's murder by a minor hoodlum was portrayed in the press as just retribution, a surprisingly different image of the gangleader emerges from another source, the confidential reports prepared by a private investigator for the New York Kehillah. In August 1912, Rabbi Judah L. Magnes, the Kehillah's chairman, hired Abraham Shoenfeld to serve as chief crime investigator of the organization's "vigilance committee" (the name was later changed to Bureau of Social Morals). The immediate stimulus for the unprecedented undertaking was the gangland killing of Herman Rosenthal,

a Jewish gambler. For months, while the perpetrators of the crime were pursued, apprehended, tried, sentenced to death and executed, public attention was riveted on the prominence of Jews among those connected with the murder and those involved in the wider world of gambling, police and political corruption, and violence.²³

The Kehillah's effort to uproot crime in the Jewish quarter depended on gathering precise and trustworthy intelligence that could be used to pressure the politicians and the police department to act expeditiously and forcefully. Shoenfeld's veracity and experience were crucial to the success of the operation. Although only twenty-one at the time, he came with respectable credentials having served under George J. Kneeland in the Rockefeller-financed study of commercialized vice in New York City. Magnes regularly scrutinized Shoenfeld's reports, as did Harry Newburger, a reputable lawyer who handled the legal work of the Kehillah, and both vouched for his credibility and expertise. Finally, a board of distinguished citizens, among them bankers Jacob Schiff, Felix Warburg, William Salomon, Adolph Lewisohn, lawyer Louis Marshall, and Judge Samuel Greenbaum, monitored the activities of the vigilance committee and its chief investigator to assure the reliability of the undertaking.²⁴

For Shoenfeld this was not only the moment to "clean up" the East Side, but also the opportunity to educate uptown Jewry's most influential notables about the social world of Jewish criminality. Shoenfeld laced his facts on crime with personal observations, analysis and exhortations. In flamboyant prose, he warned of the decadence, corruption and iniquity infesting the Jewish quarter, and in brief profiles he depicted the brutality and depravity of the more infamous hoodlums, pimps, madams and thieves. Incredibly, the crusading investigator found much to admire in Zelig, the Zelig whom *The World* described as "the most notorious gunman, gang leader and pick-pocket in the city." For Shoenfeld he was also defender of the Jewish quarter and a model of manhood.²⁵

Both themes appear in the opening page of a long account of Zelig's criminal career, most likely written in August 1912, three months before his murder. Shoenfeld announces the manhood motif in these words:

"He [Zelig] is about twenty-six years old; five foot eleven inches; somewhat bandy legged; raw boned; broken nose; clean shaven; healthful dark fearless eyes; splendid disposition and a very good conversationalist. . . . At

*all times he has had the reputation amongst his friends and associates as being a good scrapper and above all a man of principle which readily understood is a quality seldom found amongst thieves. You may find honor but never principle."*²⁶

Shoenfeld then states the defender motif:

"The city has been stirred by the means of copies of newspapers containing his name and pictures and his awful record, but I wish to state that if ever a man has done real good work for the East Side unknowingly it was he. Outlaw he may be classed but he has done one thing and that is, he has rid the East Side of Italian pimps and thieves."

From their base in downtown's Little Italy, gang-leaders like Paul Kelly (Paulo Vaccarelli) and Jack Sirrocco ordered their hoodlums and procurers into the neighboring Jewish quarter to hold up gambling houses and to lure young Jewish women from the dancing halls and balls into prostitution. The raids on the gambling houses located in his territory, according to Shoenfeld, challenged Zelig's reign and threatened a lucrative income, while the presence of Italian procurers offended his moral and Jewish sensibilities. To reassert his power – whenever that was necessary – Zelig retaliated. He struck at the saloon headquarters of the rival chiefs, terrorized their "dives" and "hangouts" and barred Italians – by murder on at least one occasion – from attending social affairs held in his domain. His goal remained the brutal exploitation of the small gamblers, madams, and merchants in his district. Nevertheless those who paid tribute to him in exchange for a measure of peace and stability also saw him as defender of the quarter from outside gangs.²⁷ Shoenfeld describes a ball Zelig ran at the height of his career:

"Not alone did crooks, gamblers and others attend this ball but Eastside businessmen, young and old, came to pay willing tribute to Jack Zelig. There was a large crowd of legitimate businessmen. . . . Jack was very popular. Half of these people he had never seen nor spoken to in all his life."

Towards the end of his report, written after the gangster's death, Shoenfeld summed up Zelig's contribution:

"He cleared the East Side of Italians who were wont to holdup stuss houses and legitimate business places. He cleared the East Side of Ital-

ians who could be seen walking through the streets with Jewish girls whom they were working into the business of prostitution. He prevented more hold-ups and other things of a similar nature during his career than one thousand policemen."

Such successes depended on personal prowess and acquiring a reputation as a dauntless and invincible battler, a reputation that would intimidate friend and foe. Zelig, Shoenfeld reported, was only a fair shot with the gun, "but he is a fighting terrier. The man is a demon when his blood is boiling. He can fight fifty men at once if he has them in front of him and is not taken unawares, and when he hits with his fist it descends like a lion's paw." On one occasion Zelig and two of his henchmen walked into a saloon in the Italian quarter, unarmed, looking for and then finding Jack Sirrocco. Other Italian gang-leaders entered the saloon. "At once his [Zelig's] suspicions were aroused and his thoughts were augmented by the fact that twenty Italians had hastily gathered in the saloon which is in front of the dive . . . and were holding whispered conversations in the Italian language." As Zelig tried to leave he was insulted and ridiculed by Sirrocco. "Jack did not dally but suddenly struck Sirrocco an awful punch on the jaw with his fist which knocked him down and out. Zelig and his two friends took the mob of Italians by surprise. . . . The Italians fought wildly but the twenty or more of them were routed and whipped by the three Jew boys, as they were known to the Italians, and to prove this, it is only necessary to state that when the police arrived on the scene, there were only two Italians left in the place, but every Jew was there."

In addition to Zelig's fearlessness, he enjoyed other attributes that swelled Shoenfeld's ethnic pride. Although by nature one who always looked after his own affairs, Zelig "is built so that he cannot bear to see an innocent bystander or unsuspecting person being taken advantage of or wrongfully abused." Fearlessness and fairness led to civic virtue. In the fight for the Democratic Party leadership of the 10th Assembly District in 1911, a Dr. Morris Klein challenged the Tammany incumbent, Larry Mulligan, the step-brother of Big Tim Sullivan. The issue was Tammany's use of gorillas and repeaters at the polls. Klein hired "Jack Zelig and his friends to protect the voters." Zelig went from booth to booth "driving away Italian gorillas one after the other. He was not doing any gorilla work, nor were his men. They were endeavoring to keep things straight." Shoenfeld claims that Zelig's

defiance of Sullivan and his hired thugs marked the turning point in the fall of the Sullivan clan and in Tammany's hold on the lower East Side.

The New York American elaborated upon Shoenfeld's portrait of Zelig as the embodiment of manhood. "Best Husband That Ever Lived, Says Gunman's Wife" – ran the headline of a long interview with Zelig. The heart of the interview was the gangleader's moving account of his nine-year old son and his plans for the boy's future. When asked what he was doing to train his son "so that he may not also go wrong," Zelig laid down some rules for the upbringing of boys "that might well be pasted up on the wall of every father's room. Make an athlete of your boy; keep him off the streets; never let him play marbles for keeps; keep him away from small dice and poolrooms; make a companion and chum of him." Playing marbles for keeps was morally the most dangerous for "it gives a boy his first taste of gambling." The interview also touched on Zelig's hobbies (swimming and reading). His favorite authors were Shakespeare, Victor Hugo and Eugene Sue. "I like *Les Misérable* best of all. Isn't that part fine where he goes up that wall?"²⁸

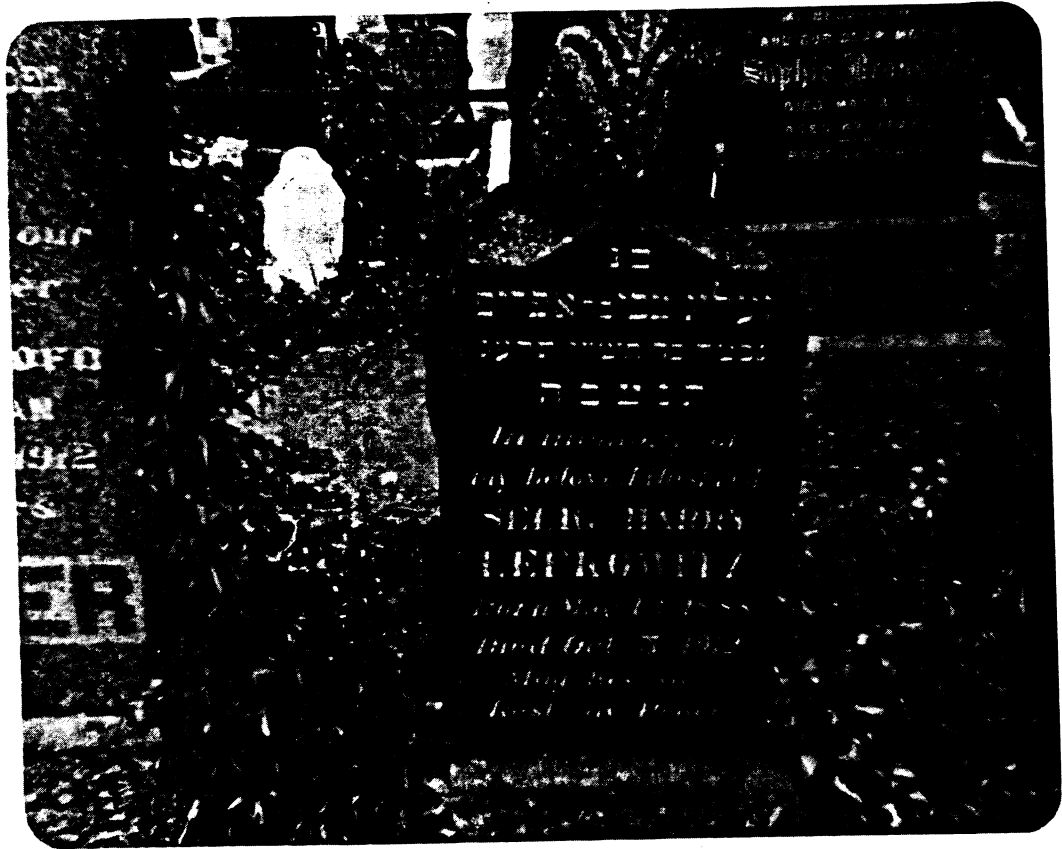
There is the stuff of instant legend in Shoenfeld's depiction of Zelig, even though it was intended for the eyes of the sober-minded men of affairs who supervised the undertaking. Indeed, herein lies the distinctive value of Shoenfeld's testimony: that his portrait of the gang chief echoed the sentiments held by many at a time when crime was public and fixed, a fact of life, in the immigrant quarters and when ethnic self-esteem was low. What Shoenfeld said in private, the popular press on occasion stated openly. It humanized Zelig, ascribed American virtues to him, and identified him as a proud Jew. Fifty years after the death of Zelig this writer asked Judge Jonah Goldstein who had been a young lawyer at the time and involved in local politics why so many attended his funeral. Did the East Side look upon him as a hero? The judge replied:

*"Going to Coney Island, you take the street car at the Brooklyn Bridge. Jack Zelig and a couple of his thugs would hire some Jews with berd [beards] to ride on the open trolley cars. Then some good for nothing loafers would come along and pull the Jews' beards. They'd give it to those who pulled the beards. They didn't want a Jew's beard pulled. They had never been educated in Hebrew, didn't go to shul, but they weren't going to have a Jew tossed around because he was a Jew. . . . These fellows made it possible for the Jews not to get tossed around."*²⁹

The murdered Zelig received one of the most stately and memorable funerals the Jewish quarter had seen. His confederates hired a fleet of cars to carry the mourners to Washington Cemetery in Brooklyn where they buried him in a choice plot between the graves of Jacob Gordin, the well-known Yiddish playwright, and a "famous rabbi."³⁰ When the coffin was taken out of Zelig's Broome Street headquarters, a group of Talmud Torah children walked behind it reciting psalms as the funeral procession made its way to Delancey Street and then to the Manhattan Bridge. According to the *Varheyt*, ten thousand gathered to watch the procession, and three thousand followed the coffin on foot across the East River. At the cemetery Cantor Goldberg of the Shaare Shamayim synagogue and his choir sang the traditional *El maleh rahamim* prayer, and Rabbi Adolf Spiegel of the Shaare Zedek synagogue delivered the eulogy. The ever-observant Shoenfeld noted in his report that "only the funeral of Rabbi Jacob Joseph surpassed this, the funeral of Jack Zelig."³¹

What did this mean? For four days following Zelig's murder the Yiddish dailies were preoccupied with the question. As to Zelig, he was "the chief of a gang that for money cracked heads, broke bones and routinely committed murder." Absent was any mention of the mitigating deeds Shoenfeld and others described. The Yiddish press detailed the protection rackets, the "taxing" of gambling houses, and the strong-arm jobs carried out for the politicians during election time and for the unions and the employers during the strikes as a calamity for Jews and for the Jewish East Side. The papers also asked why so notorious a gangster as Zelig had walked the streets of New York with impunity and carried on his criminal activities openly. And, simultaneously, they continued the searing self-analysis of the causes of Jewish crime begun only months before with the murder of Herman Rosenthal.

But the magnificent funeral, how was one to understand that? "Imagine," the *Forverts* asked, "if a greenhorn fresh from Ellis Island came upon this impressive funeral. He would have surely assumed that it was for a man of great distinction in Israel, perhaps a luminary in the Torah, and if not a respected figure in the community then at least a great philanthropist. So it would be in the old home. How astonished the greenhorn would be to hear that the parade to the cemetery was for a leader of robbers, murderers and cadets whose greatest virtue was his iniquity." The *Forverts* reproached the respectable Jews whose passivity had enabled hoodlums like Zelig to attain



A photograph of Big Jack Zelig's gravestone in Washington Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York.
(Courtesy Dr. Tessa Lebinger and Dr. Martin Lebinger)

power. But there was a further shame. *Kley kodesh*—religious functionaries—were hired for pay to glorify the dead gangster. True, in Europe wealth bought honors in life and in death, "but thoroughly vile criminals, murderers and cadets received a donkey's burial, a grave beyond the cemetery fence." The *Varhey* echoed the *Forverts'* anguish. "Imagine if all this had happened in a Jewish ghetto in the old home, with the values of the old home, with its moral consciousness and sense of duty, imagine the sort of funeral such as Zelig would have had and where he would have been buried."³²

Corrupting or discarding altogether the old world practice of judging the departed symbolized communal disorder and the collapse of the once powerful way that a community reasserted its collective values. "Weep not for the dead," the *Tageblat* intoned, "best weep for those who followed behind the coffin. . . . And weep, too, for those who sent Talmud Torah pupils to recite Psalms, mocking the Jewish religion and Jewish honor. We should weep that there are such Talmud Torahs that sent children to say 'and righteousness shall go before him' for Big Jack Zelig. Cry out, too, for the chaos and the licentiousness that reigns among us that such an episode could happen."³³

Thus in America while the rites of death remained important and a spur to communal organization, the powerful *hevra kadisha* became an adjunct to the synagogue or benevolent society, or it functioned as a group of religious specialists hired by a funeral director. No longer did it discriminate between saints and sinners. Other devices in some small measure filled the vacuum, the press for one. The Yiddish press declared Zelig a public enemy and a menace to the Jewish community. And yet an element of ambiguity remains. The ten thousand who turned out for his funeral surely included hundreds from the underworld and perhaps hundreds more of the curious, as the Yiddish newspapers claimed. But many may have come to pay their last respects to Zelig, a defender of his people, the cocky American-made Jew who had made it in the no-holds-barred contest for riches and power. In fact, a decade and a half later, the Yiddish press that had condemned Zelig praised Rothstein.

It is worth noting that the Catholic Church faced a parallel situation. The funerals of gangsters of the Catholic faith presented a dilemma for the church. Many of them were lavish affairs carried out with pomp and dignity. In Chicago, thousands attended the funerals of Jim Colosimo and Dion

O'Banion including judges, congressmen, state senators and aldermen. However, the Archbishop of Chicago issued an order refusing a Christian burial to gangsters. "Any gangster who, because of his conduct, is looked upon as a public sinner or who by his refusal to comply with the laws of his church regarding attendance at church services and Easter duty, such a man is to be refused a Christian burial."³⁴ In the case of O'Banion, "it was admitted by friends that every effort had been made to have his funeral services conducted in some church." Occasionally hard bargaining won a measure of leniency: no ceremonies at the church, but a priest was allowed to officiate at the cemetery, or, the priest was allowed to say a prayer in the street outside the church.³⁵ But in New York, when Frank Aiello (Yale) – Brooklyn gunman, bootlegger, neighborhood philanthropist and supporter of his parish church – was buried, a mass was celebrated for "the Robin Hood of Brooklyn," as some called him. Two hundred cars were in the funeral procession, stores and businesses of the neighborhood closed in respect for the "good Samaritan," and houses were draped in black cloth. *Progresso Italo-Americano* reminded its readers of his donation which made possible the construction of the Italian parochial school next to the Church of Santa Rosalia. "Although mixed in shady dealings, Aiello had a generous heart and liked to protect the weak."³⁶ Despite its hierarchic and disciplined organization, the Catholic Church was hard put to enforce its control over the burial of the dead.

For a moment, one memorable occasion appeared to promise a restoration and American adaptation of the venerated tradition of a community paying homage to its saintly figures. When Sholom Aleichem, the beloved Yiddish author, died in New York in 1916, the Yiddish press declared a day of collective mourning. It called upon Jews to stay away from work and attend the funeral. The Kehillah took charge of the funeral arrangements. For two days and nights the body lay in state in Sholom Aleichem's apartment with a changing guard of Jewish writers keeping vigil. The procession stopped at the Ohel Yitzhak Congregation where a memorial service was held, and then it paused at the *Forward* Building, the Kehillah offices in the United Hebrew Charities Building, HIAS headquarters where Sholom Aleichem's son recited the *kaddish*, and Kessler's Theater. At all of these places spokesmen for the institutions eulogized the famous author. A second memorial service took place in the Educational Alliance where Judah Magnes, the poet Yehoash (Solomon Bloomgarden), Israel Friedlaender of the Jewish

Theological Seminary, the dramatist David Pinski, and the popular Yiddish preacher, Hirsch Masliansky, spoke, and Yossele Rosenblat, the famous cantor of the day, sang the *El male rahamim*. The eminent guests sitting on the platform included Jacob Schiff. Abraham Cahan, the *Forverts's* editor, was one of the honorary pallbearers, an American invention that Sholom Aleichem would have surely satirized to the entertainment of his readers. The *hevra kadisha* of Congregation Ohavei Zedek handled the ritual internment of the body which took place at the Workmen Circle's Mount Carmel Cemetery in Brooklyn. There were more eulogies at the graveside where the Yiddish writers Sholem Asch and Abraham Raisin spoke, as well as the Yiddish socialist poet, Morris Winchevsky, the renowned European Zionist, Shmaryahu Levin, and the socialist Zionist leader, Nahman Syrkin.³⁷

The celebration was an extraordinary ecumenical event, uniting the most disparate elements in a demonstration of affection for their cultural hero. The Yiddish press stirred the Jewish public, and the most representative agency in the community succeeded in enlisting the secularists and the religious, the Zionists and the socialists in a common expression of grief and tribute. But it was a one-time event. Neither before nor after did New York Jewry so honor one of its own. The public's response to Zelig's funeral, the spectacle of Sholom Aleichem's funeral, the Yiddish press' respectful leaving of Rothstein and the virtuous intentions of the Adath Israel founders, represented old values and traditions floundering about in the cross-currents of a new day and a new land.

In Sheenie Mike, the mother laments over the aloneness of a family branch cut off from its source and over the chasm between the father's submission to adversity and the son's dream of a kingdom.

*"The grandfathers, the pious watercarriers and greasy
godfearing butchers,
stayed in their cemeteries across the ocean.
They didn't intercede
when the red-eyed father expansively
took poverty into his house, chanting:
Now, shulkhn, a table, and kise, a chair.*

Notes

Part of the research for this paper was conducted at the American Jewish Archives of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati while I held a Senior Lowenstein-Wiener Fellowship. I also made use of the American Jewish Archives' collection in Jerusalem. I wish to express my thanks to Dr. Abraham Peck, the administrative director of the American Jewish Archives, for making it possible to spend time in Cincinnati and for making the visit all that a researcher could wish. I am also thankful to the Central Archives of the History of the Jewish People where I once more made use of the Judah L. Magnes Papers and for permission to quote extensively from the collection. A grant by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities provided some of the funding for sustained research.

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1. The original is in the possession of the United Hebrew Community of New York (Adath Israel), the translation is by the author.

2. *The Selected Poems of Jacob Glatstein*, translated from the Yiddish with an Introduction by Ruth Whitman (New York: October House, 1972), p. 35.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 36. An analysis of the poem may be found in Janet R. Hadda, *Yankev Glatshiteyn* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), pp. 42-45. Hadda agrees with Ruth Whitman that Sheenie Mike is "an imaginary composite of several real gangsters who grew up in the lower East Side of New York in the nineteen twenties. Professor Shmeruk called my attention to the fact that the poem first appeared in *Inzich*, March 28, 1928 and was included in the selection of Glatstein's entitled *Kreydos* which appeared in 1929.

4. *Morgen Zhurnal*, August 29, 1923, p. 1, August 30, pp. 1, 6, August 31, pp. 1, 4; *Forverts*, August 29, 1923, p. 1, August 30, pp. 1, 3, August 31, p. 1; *Der Tog*, August 29, 1923, p. 1, August 30, p. 1; *New York World*, August 30, 1923, p. 15. For a brief summary of Kid Dropper's career, see Albert Fried, *The Rise and the Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), pp. 133-36.

5. *Morgen Zhurnal*, August 31, 1923, p. 1; *Forverts*, August 31, 1923, p. 1; *Der Tog*, August 31, 1923, p. 1; *The World*, August 31, 1923, p. 13.

6. Jenna Weissman Joselit, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community: 1900-1940* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 140-44; *Der Tog*, November 5, 1928, p. 1, November 6, p. 1, November 7, pp. 1, 8, November 8, p. 1; *Morgen Zhurnal*, November 7, 1928, p. 1, November 9, p. 1, November 12, p. 9; *New York Times*, November 7, 1928, p. 28.

7. *Der Tog*, November 8, 1928, p. 1.

8. *Morgen Zhurnal*, November 8, 1923, p. 1; *Forverts*, November 6, 1928, p. 1.

9. *Der Tog*, November 7, 1928, p. 8; *Morgen Zhurnal*, November 12, 1928, p. 9; *New York Times*, November 12, 1928, pp. 1, 16, December 18, p. 2, February 8, 1929, p. 25, April 16, p. 60; Leo Katcher, *The Big Bankroll* (New York: Harper, 1958), pp. 330-35.

10. *Jubilee Journal on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Adath Israel of New York, United Hebrew Community, 1901-1926* (Yiddish Section), pp. 15-16. Kaletsky was the grandson of Rabbi Judah Bachrach who wrote novellae and glosses to the Talmud and to the works of Alfasi and Maimonides. In 1899, Kaletsky published in New York a history of Jewish persecution during the Crusader period in Hebrew titled, *She'erit Yisrael*.

11. Isaac E. Rontch, ed., *Di yidishe landsmanshaftn fun new york* (New York, I.L. Peretz Yiddish Writer's Union, 1938), pp. 14, 45-51, 77, 174; Hannah Kliger, "Traditions of Grass-Roots Organization and Leader-

ship: The Continuity of Landsmanshaftn in New York, "American Jewish History, 76 (September, 1986), 29-31; Michael R. Weissner, *A Brotherhood of Memory: Jewish Landsmanshaftn in the New World* (New York, Basic Books, 1985), pp. 92-99, 163-74.

12. Scholem Aleichem, *Kleyne mentschelekh mit kleyne hasoges, Berl Ayzik, Ale verk fun Scholem Aleichem*, vol. 6, pp. 251-54, Vilna-Warsaw, 1925.

13. Arthur A. Goren, "Traditional Institutions Transplanted: the Hevra Kadisha in Europe and the United States," *The Jews of North America: Immigration, Settlement, and Ethnic Identity*, edited by Moses Rischin, (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1987), pp. 66-68.

14. "Chronicles of the Adath Israel Society of New York," pp. 973-71. The chronicle is hand-printed in a numbered ledger book beginning on page 998; because of the Hebrew the pagination is in reverse order.

15. *Ibid.* p. 968.

16. *Jubilee Journal of Adath Israel of New York*. (Published on the twenty-fifth anniversary, 1926), p. 28.

17. *Forty Years, 1901-1941, United Hebrew Community of New York* (unpaginated English section).

18. Goren, *The Jews of North America*, p. 77, note 11.

19. For a general account of Jewish criminality on the lower East Side of New York, see Fried, *The Rise and Fall*, pp. 7-36, and for a portrait of Zelig's career, see Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld* (New York: Knopf, 1928), pp. 328-343.

20. "Reports of the Vigilantes Committee," Bureau of Social Morals of the New York Kehillah, file 1780, Judah L. Magnes Papers, Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem.

21. *Ibid.*; *New York World*, October 6, 1912, p. 2; *New York American*, October 6, 1912, p. 1; Joselit, *Our Gang*, p. 41-44.

22. Arthur A. Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 171; Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, p. 333; Story 14, File 1780, Story 747, File 1788, Magnes Papers; interview with Abraham Shoenfeld, February 6, 1965. For a dramatic account of such benefit balls, see *New York Times*, January 11, 1914, pp. 1-2.

23. Goren, *New York Jews*, pp. 148-151, 154-57.

24. *Ibid.* pp. 158-64, 169-75.

25. Interview with Abe Shoenfeld.

26. Story 14, File 1780, Magnes Papers. Subsequent quotations by Shoenfeld about Zelig are from this source and will not be cited.

27. Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, pp. 329-36; *New York American*, December 3, 1911, p. 9; Fried, *The Jewish Gangster*, pp. 31-33.

28. *New York American*. August 21, 1912, p. 2. The newspaper reprinted the interview on October 6, 1912, p. 3.

29. Interview with Judge Jonah J. Goldstein, October 24, 1964.

30. I wish to acknowledge the help of Dr. Tessa Lebinger and Dr. Martin Lebinger who visited Washington Cemetery to confirm the location of Zelig's grave and who supplied me with the following information. The inscription on the tombstone reads: "In memory of my beloved husband / Selig Harry Lefkowitz / Born May 13, 1888 / Died October 5, 1912 / May his soul / rest in peace." However, the death card in the cemetery office reads: "Albert, Zelig / Society, Jehuda Wisternitza / Row 3, Grave 4, Cemetery 4 / N. W. Siegel Plot #2 / Died - October 5, 1912 / Buried - October 7, 1912 / Cause of death - Pistol shot wound / Age - 24 years / Place of death - in transit to Bellevue Hospital / Next of kind - (left blank). The Lebingers found the grave of Jacob Gordin about fifty feet to the left of Zelig's grave. The "famous rabbi" mentioned in the newspaper accounts and in Shoenfeld's report may have been buried in a plot marked by one of turned-over tombstones or one of the tombstones whose inscription was rubbed off to be found to the right of Zelig's grave. The cemetery office was unable to provide any further information on this point.

31. Shoenfeld, Story 14, Magnes Papers; *Varhey*, October 8, 1912, p. 4; *Forverts*, October 8, 1912, p. 4; *The World*, October 8, 1912, p. 2.

32. *Forverts*, October 8, 1912, p. 4; *Varheyt*, October 8, 1912, p. 4.
33. *Tageblat*, October 9, 1912, p. 4.
34. John Landesco, *The Illinois Crime Survey: Part III - Organized Crime in Chicago*, pp. 1026.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 1028-1030, 1032-1036, 1039.
36. *Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 3, 1928, p. 3; July 4, p. 3. I appreciate the help of Dominick Romeo who examined the Italian press for me.
37. *Forverts*, May 14, 1916, p. 1, May 16, p. 1; *New York Times*, May 16, 1916, p. 13; *American Hebrew*, May 19, 1916, p. 45; Marie Waife-Goldberg, *My Father Sholom Aleichem* (London: Victor Gollancz), pp. 315-16.