

# **The Christie Pits Riot: a Case Study in the Dynamics of Ethnic Violence — Toronto, August 16, 1933\***

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Les deux auteurs de ce document décrivent la dynamique de l'affaire de l'Émeute qui survint à Toronto en août 1933: l'Émeute Christie Pits où Juifs et Gentils se disputèrent avec une intensité jamais vue auparavant. Ce document volumineux se départage en quatre parties distinctes.

La première donne un aperçu des événements de l'émeute. La seconde met l'accent sur la création des Clubs de Croix Gammée. Ceci eut pour effet, du moins aux yeux de la communauté juive d'alors, d'intensifier l'antisémitisme contemporain.

Dans la troisième partie, les deux auteurs du document mettent l'accent sur la précipitation de la violence et outre la croix gammée, d'autres symboles antisémitiques y sont analysées à l'avant-veille de l'émeute.

Enfin la quatrième et dernière partie, est consacrée en partie à la mobilisation de certains des spectateurs pour entrer en action. Les auteurs concluent sur le fait que la violence collective des groupes ethniques représente la forme la plus grave de conflit entre groupes ethniques. Elle est (cette violence) peut être la forme la plus extrême d'arrangement par le biais duquel on peut régler des tensions inter-ethniques. Les auteurs espèrent toutefois que leur analyse et leurs travaux ne resteront pas vains et seront une première étape vers un avenir meilleur.

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Although the theme of inequality permeates studies of ethnic relations in this country, the dynamics of inter- and intra- ethnic violence in Canadian society have not yet been analysed. Rather, this dimension of ethnic relations has been discussed only as it relates to the treatment of a particular ethnic minority or else as a possible outcome of general ethnic tension and conflict.

In some measure, this lack of analysis may result from the myth that, in contrast to the United States, where ethnic violence has been a significant chapter of history, Canada has largely avoided this extreme of ethnic relationships. Sociologists studying Canada, so cherishing the idea of tranquility in ethnic relations, have not attempted to investigate systematically cases in which violence has erupted or to develop a set of generalizations concerning their development in this country.

The omission has not been complete. Although he has not focussed upon ethnic violence specifically, Kenneth McNaught has developed a thesis that collective violence in Canadian society has historically been less pervasive than in the United States but more effective politically:

The most important comparison between the roles of violence in American and Canadian history may be that in Canada public and private violence has been more, rather than less, closely related to the operations of the political system than has been the case in the United States''.\*

Numerous examples in Canadian history suggest that:

non-government collective violence has also frequently resulted in changes in both domestic and external policies — whether the violence is actual or anticipated (apprehended).†

Although we are not qualified to judge the general validity of McNaught's thesis our research offers limited support for his position. In this paper, part of a larger study on ethnic violence in Canada, we describe the dynamics of the Christie Pits riot, involving Jews and Gentiles, that occurred in Toronto in August 1933. The first section of the paper sketches the events of the riot. The second focuses on the formation of Swastika Clubs, which, for the Toronto Jewish community, dramatized the intensity of contemporary anti-semitism. The presence of the Swastika Clubs strained the relations between Jews and Gentiles in the city and, more importantly, intensified a generalized belief

\*K. M. McNaught. Violence in Canadian history, in J.S. Moir, editor: *Character and Circumstance* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970) p. 84

†Ibid., Collective violence in Canadian history: some problems of definition and research, in *Report of the proceedings: Workshop on Violence in Canadian Society* (Toronto: Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto, 1975) p. 173

within the Jewish community that outsiders regarded them as different. And many of the younger generation of Jews felt the perpetrators of overt anti-semitic acts should be met with physical resistance.

In the third part of this paper, we focus on the precipitant of the violence — the use of the swastika and other anti-semitic symbols in the park two nights earlier — and in the fourth section we discuss the role of rumour in mobilizing some of the spectators for action.

To collect the data for this paper, we used simultaneously two principal means: (1) a review of the newspaper accounts of the riot and the events leading to it, and (2) informal interviews. We organized a thorough search of all the English and Yiddish newspapers in Toronto, for their accounts of the riot and its social context. This part of the data-gathering proved straightforward. Somewhat more complicated was our attempt to locate respondents who were either physically present at Christie Pits on the night of the riot or whose recall of the events (and of the times in general) could provide us with more details and help us put the incident in historical perspective. To this end, we relied on a ‘snowball approach’, expecting respondents to provide us with names of others we might contact. While this tactic was not entirely unsuccessful, the results proved more limited than we had anticipated. A typical comment from a respondent was: “It’s hard to say who’s around. After all, its been fifty years and, unfortunately, many of the guys are now deceased.” Our most productive venture in locating respondents was an advertisement in the *Canadian Jewish News* in which we briefly described our research objective and invited individuals who recalled the riot to telephone us collect. (An announcement broadcast over the CBC station in Toronto was somewhat less successful). In all, we interviewed sixty people, the vast majority of whom were Jewish males. Our efforts to find members of the Pit gang or others from the other side have, to this point, met with little success.<sup>1</sup>

## THE STORY OF THE RIOT

On Wednesday evening, 16 August, 1933 a riot occurred in Christie Pits immediately following the conclusion of the second game in a semi-final series for the Toronto Amateur Softball Association (T.A.S.A.) championship between Harbord Playground (whose members were mostly Jewish boys) and St. Peter’s (a Gentile team).

Christie Pits is officially called Willowvale Park, although few Torontonians know this name, and fewer still use it. Running north from Bloor Street to Barton Avenue, the 30 acre park is flanked by Christie Street on the east and Crawford Street on the west. Its shape approximates that of a soup bowl, the

rim of the bowl being on street level. Several paths lead down into the Pits from Bloor; moreover, the bottom of the “bowl” can be reached by walking down the grassy slopes from any point on the perimeter.

Christie Pits has long been a sports and recreation area, with hockey dominating in the winter months and baseball in the summer. In the 1930’s, as today, a hardball diamond was in the northwest corner. The clubhouse stood where it stands now, near the middle of the flat.<sup>2</sup>

Several thousand people were in the park when the riot broke out, most of them having been spectators at one or both of the baseball games which had been played there that evening,<sup>3</sup> and more arrived during the several hours of violence, which apparently resulted in scores of injuries.

The seriousness of the riot, one of Toronto’s worst non-labour disturbances in the twentieth century, can be grasped by surveying the following day’s headlines from the city’s major newspapers and the Jewish press: “Scores Hurt as Swastika Mobs Riot at Willowvale / Mayor Promises Immediate Probe of Disturbance / Thousands Caught Up in Park Melee / Gangs Wielding Lead Pipes and Bats Sweep Streets, Bludgeoning Victims” (*The Mail and Empire*); “Swastika Feud Battles in Toronto Injure 5 / Fists, Boots, Piping Used in Bloor Street War / ‘Hail [sic] Hitler!’ Is Youth’s Cry; / City in Turmoil” (*The Globe*); “Draper Admits Receiving Riot Warning / Six Hours of Rioting Follow Hitler Shout / Scores Hurt, Two Held” (*Toronto Daily Star*); “Report Gunmen Here to Slay Swazis / Communists Incited Riot Police Authority State / Jewish Toughs Began Trouble Says Witness (*The Evening Telegram*); “Swastikas Attacks Call Forth Great Panic in the City; Mayor Stewart Agrees to Swift Steps Against Nazis, Draper is Called to Report” (*Der Yiddisher Zhurnal*).<sup>4</sup>

## **Prelude**

The riot was precipitated by events during and after the first game in the T.A.S.A. series, a game played between the same teams two evenings earlier.<sup>5</sup> During that earlier game a gang of local youths, loosely referred to as the “Pit Gang”, raised a black sweater with a huge white swastika sewn on its back and shouted “Heil Hitler” in the general direction of the Harbord team. (Displaying the swastika on clothing was a practice that the city had already seen a great deal of during the two previous weeks in a show of force by an organization called the Swastika Clubs. As we shall see, this phenomenon which occurred in the Beaches neighbourhood, was probably related to the Christie Pits riot.)

After the game, which Harbord won in overtime, the same members of the Pit Gang tried to intimidate the Jewish players and threatened them with

violence. Although the *Toronto Daily Star* reported that many members of the gang carried “clubs made of sawed-off broom handles” (15 August:2) no major confrontation ensued. But after the park attendants had left for the night, several gang members returned and painted a large swastika and the words “Hail [sic] Hitler” on the roof of the clubhouse in the middle of the park.

On Tuesday, when the *Star* reported the incident, it noted that members of the gang had earlier confided to one of its reporters that they “wished to get the Jews out of our park.” The *Star* also reported, ominously, that “[t]he Jewish boys promise that there will be trouble when they play there on Wednesday evening” (*ibid*). The *Mail and Empire* carried the same warning by the Jewish boys.

The media reports fanned the rumour mill set in motion by the incident after Monday’s game. On Wednesday, even before the Harbord — St. Peter’s game started, several hundred Jewish and Gentile boys between the ages of 15 and 21 were in the park ready (and some looking) for trouble.

Estimates of the size of the crowd in the Pits that evening range from 500 or 600 to 15,000.<sup>6</sup> All of the interviewees who had been present agreed that the hills on the first- and third- base sides were packed with spectators. In addition, a sizeable number of onlookers moved over to the softball diamond at the conclusion of the hardball game played in the Pits that evening. Finally, the crowd was augmented after the outbreak of trouble: reinforcements called up by both sides and other people who rushed to the Pits out of sheer curiosity. All together, it seems likely that at least 2,000 to 3,000 people were in the park when the riot broke out. Of these, probably no more than several hundred actively participated in the physical violence, although many others undoubtedly shouted encouragement to one side or the other. More than one of our Jewish respondents reported many in the crowd were yelling “kill the Jews” and other threatening phrases.

During the course of the game, Jewish and Gentile youths clashed several times, but the police were able to restore order. Nevertheless, tension was high and the crowd expected bigger trouble. The spark that set off the riot occurred at the very end of the ballgame, which St. Peter’s won 5-4. A group of boys on the “Camel’s Hump”, a small hill in the south of the park, unfurled a large swastika banner. Immediately, 100 to 200 Jewish youths, amid cries of “the swastika, the swastika”, charged across the flat towards those displaying the banner. The swastika group fled up the slope towards Bloor Street with the Jewish boys in hot pursuit. When the two groups met on Bloor, serious fighting broke out and it continued as they moved south of Bloor, down Montrose Avenue. Broomhandles, clubs and sawed-off pipes were used as weapons and

many were injured on both sides. Ultimately, the Jewish boys captured the swastika banner and tore it to shreds, but the fighting continued long after this 'triumph'.

The riot had started between 7:30 and 7:45 p.m., but police reinforcements did not arrive until much later. For an hour or so, the fighting was all but unchecked, the few officers of regular duty at the park being overwhelmed by the extent of the violence.<sup>7</sup> For the next several hours, the fighting ebbed and flowed. Both sides sent and received reinforcements. Boys on bicycles carried word of the fighting down the Jewish district centred on College Street and Spadina Avenue, alerting Jewish youths that their help was needed. Some Italian boys also came to the aid of their Jewish friends.<sup>8</sup> Strengthening the appeal for help was a rumour that Joe Goldstein, a Jewish boy who had been knocked unconscious, had been killed.<sup>9</sup> Trucks and cars were commandeered, and fresh troops made their way up Bathurst, Palmerston and Grace Streets, along Bloor to the Pits. When the police reinforcements (foot, horse and motorcycle) appeared, they tried to cordon off the area, but in spite of the police blockade, several vehicles managed to get through.

Skirmishes between bands of Jewish and Gentile youth were reported as late as 2:00 a.m., and tension remained high in the park area and the Spadina/College district for several days. Rumours spread like wildfire among both camps. On more than one occasion boys affiliated with the Pit Gang mobilized for a threatened attack by Jewish boys, whereas the Spadina group patrolled that area of the city for intruders from the Pits. As late as Tuesday, 22 August, the *Toronto Daily Star* could report: "Swastika Gang Drives Citizens from City Park / Hoodlums Roam Breathing Spaces Armed With Bars, Sticks and Bricks / Looking for Fight / East End Toughs Wear Nazis Emblem on Shirts — Pool Room Frequenters."

All the newspapers say that scores of people were injured, although fewer were treated at the nearby Toronto Western Hospital. The report in the *Telegram* suggests one reason for the discrepancy: few of the injured gave correct information to the hospital or to the press:

Upon investigation it was found that only one of those addresses was correct. When the Telegram inquired at the various addresses it was found that the men 'were not known there.' In some cases the addresses given were found to be vacant houses. (18 August: 1)

One of our respondents was knocked unconscious as he jumped from one of the trucks which arrived at the Pits at the outbreak of violence. He was taken to the Western Hospital. When asked why his name did not appear in the newspaper, he replied that he did not give his real name or address. Given this evidence of avoidance, we assume that many of those not seriously injured avoided medical

treatment at the hospital or sought it from neighborhood doctors.

The intensity of the passions involved in the riot is suggested by a respondent who, as a boy of 9, witnessed the following incident in a store owned by his parents:

One of the Nazis came into the store . . . bloodied . . . we had a telephone booth in the store. And he had an axle from a car cut off, about so big, 2 feet, 3 feet. This was his weapon . . . Anyway, he comes in, he gets into the telephone booth, and he's phoning, he's phoning to the Nazis. They want reinforcements, because they're getting the shit knocked out of them . . . Now you've got to visualize . . . the guy's back was to my dad. He had the phone up like this and this here car axle in his hand. And as I say my dad's a very placid man, but very strong. He went over and took the guy's hand and lifted it until his arm broke and the guy keeled over . . . He fainted. So dad just took him, dragged him to the door, pushed him out the door, closed the door, and went back and sat down.

### **Aftermath**

The riot evoked two official responses, both of considerable interest. The first is that of Mayor Stewart, who proclaimed that the public display of the swastika emblem in Toronto would render the perpetrator liable to prosecution. The second is the treatment the courts gave those arrested during and after the riot.

Mayor Stewart's statement issued on the day following the riot, read in part:

From recent occurrences in our city it must be apparent that the display in any form of the swastika emblem is provocative and tends to incite riotous conduct and a disturbance of the peace which is not at all in keeping with the good name of our city or for the public good. I, therefore, wish to warn all citizens that such use of this swastika emblem will render the person so using the same liable to prosecution to the full extent of the law. I also wish to warn all persons against taking part in an unlawful assembly. Peace order and good government is our desire. I invite co-operation.<sup>10</sup>

The Mayor's stern warning worked; from that point on, swastika activity in Toronto declined rapidly. And on account of his swift action, many members of Toronto's Jewish community held Mayor Stewart in esteem. Yet, it is not clear that the Mayor and Chief Constable Draper backed up their bark with their bite. From the extant records it appears that Mayor Stewart and Chief Draper did little investigating and even less reporting of the riot than their public statements suggest.<sup>11</sup>

Though the Mayor and Chief Constable treated the riot with seriousness in public, the courts took the attitude that it was the result of adolescent boisterousness. The evening of the riot had seen two arrests: Russell Harris, for carrying a hunting knife and Jack Roxborough, a member of the Pit Gang, for carrying a lead pipe. The charges against Harris were dismissed, since it appeared he had been helping the police during the riot.<sup>12</sup> Roxborough was

convicted — the only person to be found guilty of a charge resulting from the riot and sentenced (\$50 or two months), apparently because he was still on probation from a conviction for shopbreaking in May.

During the investigation after the riot, the *Globe* reported, the police questioned 22 members of the Pit Gang. On Friday, 18 August, they arrested three additional members — Jack Pippy, Charles Boustead and Earl Perrin. The *Toronto Daily Star* reported their alleged illegal activity:

The police say that the three men who are in custody were active in formenting the disturbance. An old blanket was obtained Wednesday afternoon and associates of the three men were directed to paint the large swastika emblem. They commenced to paint the emblem on a knoll near Bloor St., were disturbed and shifted down behind the Willowvale clubhouse, the police learned. The painters were again frightened so moved their work to a garage at the rear of Jack Pippy's home on Crawford St. The detectives, it is alleged, found white paint at the garage similar to that used in painting the design on the blanket.

Statements are said to have been made by the trio in which they admit they carried the blanket into the park and displayed the freshly painted swastika emblem. (19 August:2)

In Police Court the three plus Roxborough were found not guilty of unlawful assembly. The most complete description of the trial is found in an editorial entitled “‘Innocent’ Fun” in the Yiddish paper *Der Yiddisher Zhurnal*:

I think that the entire charge is nothing more than a joke.” With these words Magistrate Brown in Police Court freed the four young Christians who had been arrested on the charge of having caused the riot in Willovale Park on August 16, where Jews had their head split open.

Characteristically, the first of the accused did not deny the charge. He himself explained thus: “I was walking in Willovale Park because I heard that the Jews are preparing to fight the Christians. I helped paint the swastika on the blanket. And we decided among ourselves that if the Jews would start fighting we would unfurl the swastika. They started to fight in fact, and we spread out the blanket with the swastika on a hill. We considered it to be all in fun.” (27 August:3)

## **ANTI-SEMITISM: ITS ROLE IN THE RIOT**

### **Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Toronto**

We can arrive at an understanding of the Christie Pits riot only by placing the event within its relevant social context. For purposes of this paper, we focus on the phenomenon of contemporary anti-semitism and argue that from the perspective of the Jewish community, the events at Christie Pits were a climax to a series of anti-Jewish incidents and activities.

A strong consensus emerged from our Jewish respondents that life in Toronto was not easy for Jews in 1933. They were barred from certain occupations and were either refused admission or made to feel increasingly unwelcome in certain social and recreational circles. Even their physical safety

could not be assured, especially beyond the boundaries of the main Jewish settlement area. The Christie Pits riot, therefore, must be viewed in the context of underlying tensions between Gentiles and Jews:

But you've got to remember the times . . . Jews were nothing. They were second-class citizens. Now, if something was going to happen, the general attitude of the police was, "let the Nazis get their licks in, we'll come in afterwards and separate them" . . . The general attitude on the part of the police department wasn't in favour of Jews in general. Period. It wasn't uncommon for Jews to get beat up. I used to get beat up regularly. I lived in an area where if they wanted to have a little fun, they'd pick on the Jews. You go to the police and the police as much as ignored you or laughed at it.

Most significantly and in contrast to earlier anti-Jewish sentiment, which was typically expressed in actions against individuals, by 1933 a blanket condemnation had emerged. Jews felt anti-semitism was embedded in the very fabric of the society. Our respondents voluntarily offered numerous specific examples as irrefutable evidence of this phenomenon:

In those days . . . if I put in an application for a job, it was where you were born, and that was easy. What is your religion? And if you put down 'Hebrew' that was it. You couldn't be a teller in a bank. You wouldn't work at Simpson's [department store], Eaton's [department store] you couldn't be a salesman. . . . hate the Jews. No special reason. You didn't have to have any special cause. You were a Jew.

No dogs or Jews allowed at the Mineral Baths. Big sign out in the open, "No Jews." Nothing wrong with that. That was common, for the time. So if it's common for the time, the rest of the community would condone these things.

The atmosphere of the times was, no question, anti-semitic . . . Being in the minority, the Jew was shit. And I remember growing up in schools — you don't hear it today — you know, 'kike' and 'Jew' . . . and you'd always wonder what the hell did I do here? I must have killed somebody. They hate me and they get away with this. Now especially if you had a beard and you looked like the *rabbayim* [rabbis] . . . And they would drag them, three or four kids, 16 or 17 years old, like a pack of wolves. They'd jump on him and push him to the floor . . . pull his beard and yell 'Jew' and so forth. Now Nazism was rising, yes, but anti-semitism — you didn't have to be a Nazi to be an antisemite. All you had to be was a *gay*.

Young Jews, many of them second-generation Canadians, appear to have been more aware of the intensity and extensiveness of anti-semitism in Toronto than their parents. The older generation, living a cloistered life within the confines of the Jewish ghetto, had enjoyed and sought few opportunities to interact with Gentiles in the larger community. Quite naturally, the young people's activities brought them into greater contact with institutions in the larger society — public schools, social clubs, dance halls, etc. — precisely the points at which they would most realize the degree to which they were singled out for special consideration. More importantly, the younger generation was simply unfamiliar with the vicious anti-semitism that had impelled their parents

to leave Eastern Europe. By comparison, anti-Jewish sentiment in Toronto was a minor inconvenience. As one of our respondents aptly put it:

We lived in a ghetto. My father thought that this [Toronto] was paradise because he didn't speak English. Where he was in the Ukraine . . . he wasn't allowed to walk the streets and if they [the police] killed a Jew, then they didn't have to make out a report. They [my parents] came here and . . . they weren't beat up on the street. And [if] . . . a guy called them a f . . . g Jew, my father wouldn't know what the hell he was saying to start with.

## **The Swastika Clubs**

Although discrimination was a routine feature of Toronto life for Jews, in early 1933 many of them perceived a horrifying change in its manifestation with the sudden appearance of Swastika Clubs in Toronto, organized allegedly for keeping the public beaches clear of “undesirables.” As far as the Jews were concerned, these groups were rooted in anti-semitism, intentionally established to single them out, and probably Nazi organized or inspired. The rhetoric and the behaviour of the Swastika spokesmen and sympathizers convinced the Jews of the accuracy of their perception. Tensions, especially among young Jews, rose.

The trouble began in the Beaches area of Toronto — specifically in Kew Gardens — in the southeastern part of the city, a section miles from the Jewish residential area. Toronto's eastern beaches and parks were a favourite picnic area for thousands of Jewish immigrants and their families who could not afford to buy or rent cottages and who didn't have the means to travel to summer resorts (many of which, in any event, did not welcome Jews). The customs, cuisine and language of these week-end visitors were different from the prevailing norm in that area of the city.

Residents of the Beaches were disturbed over the increasing presence of Jews on the beaches and their seeming disregard for 'proper' behaviour. An unsigned letter received by the Parks Department on 29 June 1933, indicates the concerns:

. . . Do you think it would be possible to place a few picnic tables under the trees in Kew Beach Park, this side of the Tennis Court . . . and also to place a sign up on the trees This area for Gentiles only. As at present it is quite impossible to get a table in the Park, at all on Sunday: for the Jewish people seem to get every table in the Park and even if there were room for others to sit at the same table, one would hardly like to share the same table with them as our ways are so entirely different. Last week while hunting for a table so that we could spread a cloth and have a nice cool out door lunch, we came across 2 or 3 tables but they were allready [sic] occupied by Jewish people sleeping on them, so we had to be contented with eating on the grass and then our pic-nic was spoiled with ants crawling on the food.

I have seen the Jewish people stand their children, (and rather big children at that) on the tables and strip them, then dry them after being in the lake and then dress them now who

could sit and eat at that table with them. I have heard a great many of gentile people say they wish that the Parks Commission would put tables under the trees this side of the tennis court and have it Restricted to Gentile People only, then we could all enjoy the Park, without interfering with each other. I wonder Sir if you could take my suggestion into consideration (Toronto City Archives)<sup>13</sup>

Some people took much stronger and more provocative action. They painted a sign with a swastika and the words “Hail Hitler” in front of the Balmy Beach Canoe Clubhouse and posted an open letter to residents of the Beaches on its bulletin board:

We are a group of beach residents interested in the proper maintenance of the Beaches area, Kew Gardens and adjacent territory for the children and taxpayers of Ward 8 . . .

Your territory is, as most Beach residents know, PRIVATE. You have had the courage to erect a Swastika. Will you have the courage to wear one openly and show your disfavour of the invasion?

Local No. 5 of the Swastika Clubs has been formed in Kew Beach and now has a membership of forty. Commencing Monday, July 31, our members will appear on the beaches, board walks and in Kew Gardens and adjacent parks wearing a nickel-plated badge with a scarlet swastika thereon.

They will simply wear the emblem. There will be no parades or demonstrations. No speeches will be made. We feel that the emblem will have the desired effect. (*The Globe*, 2 August:2)

On 2 August, the front pages of the Toronto daily newspapers reported that the previous evening the newly formed club had organized its first march up and down the boardwalk from the clubhouse to Woodbine Avenue. Adherents, some two hundred strong, sang to the tune of “Home, Home on the Range”:

“Oh, give me a home, where the Gentiles may roam,  
Where the Jews are not rampant all day,  
Where seldom is heard, a loud Yiddish word,  
And the Gentiles are free all the day.”

Some 60 to 70 Jews and sympathizers — many coming in a large transport truck — arrived at the Beach en masse, and surrounded the clubhouse where the swastika had been posted. But by the time they got there, it had been removed, as had the letter quoted above, at the request of civil officials. According to the Police Inspector at the scene, the evening ended without trouble.

While Jews quickly charged that the Swastika Club was an anti-semitic organization, its spokesmen denied the charge, claiming it was directed against indecent conduct on the beaches. *The Globe* quoted a young member of the organization:

Residents of the lakefront area have substantial stakes in their homes. Every Saturday and Sunday the area is jammed with men and women in cars, dressing and undressing almost openly in cars without side curtains, in trucks, behind private flower beds, everywhere . . . This is an instance of what we wish to end. (2 August:3)

Membership in the club, spokesmen insisted, was open to everyone, including Jews. In a statement issued on 3 August, the group's Press Committee explained the use of the swastika and denied any connection with any Nazi or Hitlerite movement: The rest of the statement read, in part:

The Swastika emblem is chosen as befitting the organization, as it symbolizes fraternity and good luck, and it is also a modern symbol of thanks for services rendered. The Swastika Clubs will sing no songs, nor engage in parades objectionable to any nationality or creed. The Swastika Clubs have absolutely no political association of any kind. They are in no way connected with any Hitler, Fascist or Nazi movement. No parades, demonstrations, speeches or public nuisances of any kind will be enacted by the local of any Swastika Club. (*The Globe* 4 August:1)<sup>14</sup>

A few days later, B. Ganter, one of the signators of the press statement, had a slightly different explanation of the swastika symbol. The Balmy Beach area, he stated, had at one time been a camping ground for the Iroquois Indians to whom the swastika was a good luck sign: "The sign is well known in the east-end . . . We picked on it solely as an emblem of good luck" (*Toronto Daily Star*, 5 August: 3).

Yet in 1933, as *The Jewish Standard* commented:

The swastika has come to be considered a symbol of oppression and terror. Jews, liberals, artists have been persecuted, tortured, murdered in the name of this hooked cross. In the minds of all persons of intelligence, it is the synonym for bloodshed and a pagan violation of Christianity. That Canadians would adopt an emblem so horribly linked with religious and political persecution constitutes in itself an unpatriotic act contrary to the principles of Canadian and British democracy. (4 August:1)

Or, as Mr. Bennett, chairman of the publicity committee of the League for the Defense of Jewish Rights, put it:

The Swastika means suffering, death, and even torture to all our people. To the whole world it is an emblem of Hitlerism, anti-semitic Hitlerism. After Mr. Ganter's statement had appeared in the press, wherein he disavowed any connection with Hitlerism, I telephoned him, to try and arrange a meeting. He claimed the purpose of his club was merely to keep the beaches clean and orderly. We are all for that. It is to our interest, as well as to the interest of the Gentiles, that we have a beautiful city. We are ready to cooperate with him . . . I asked him why, in view of the natural resentment aroused in our people by the Swastika emblem, he didn't suggest to the club some other emblem. He replied that he was not prepared to make a statement on that. (*Toronto Daily Star*, 5 August:3).

Reactions within the Jewish community were unequivocal: the Swastika Club was linked directly with Hitlerite propaganda. The League for the Defense of Jewish Rights, the recognized representative of the Jewish community, began its official statement by downplaying the importance of the Swastika incidents by attributing their popularity to youngsters in search of excitement,<sup>15</sup> but it also warned that Toronto was in danger of becoming a

centre of Nazi propaganda.

The *Jewish Standard*, the Canadian Jewish weekly, announced in bold print “Nazis Invade Canada” and it reported that it had uncovered plans for a country-wide anti-semitic propaganda campaign (4 August:1).

The Yiddish newspaper *Der Yiddisher Zhurnal* [The Daily Hebrew Journal] boldly proclaimed: “Nazi Organization is Established in Ward 8 to Expel Jewish Visitors from the Beaches Area” (2 August:1).

Mayor Stewart’s office issued a statement that appeared sympathetic to the Jews while attempting to assuage any legitimate concerns of residents of the Beaches:

Let it be understood with the utmost of clearness that we administer our laws through the police courts, and not through private groups, clubs or demonstrations. We have an abundance of British ideals which our people might emulate and follow; we need no inspiration from foreign sources and foreign isms, but simply a proper respect for law and order and British traditions.

If there is justified complaint at the Eastern Beaches, upon the score of decency and cleanliness, we have our police department and our parks department, and we have our police courts . . .

Demonstration such as have been reported, the singing of provocative songs and so forth is un-British and un-Canadian. Such actions do not bespeak the spirit of the fine population of the East End . . .

I am anxious not to prejudice. But in these times one cannot lightly contemplate the actions of those who set race against race, and raise disturbances and animosities of a racial character. As mayor and chairman of the Board of Police commissioners, I will not tolerate nor countenance any group or individuals taking the law into their own hands or seeking to effect their own ends, or adjust what they consider proper grievances, by becoming a law unto themselves . . .

We must follow the British tradition, the British ideal, in Toronto; the organizations or political organisms of foreign lands do not need to be adopted, used or aped in this country. (*The Jewish Standard*, 4 August:3)

Despite hopes and even rumours that the Swastika Club would disband, the opposite occurred. B. Ganter, one of the spokesmen, announced that the Swastika Club idea was spreading to resorts in the suburbs and that a chapter had recently been formed at Lake Wilcox (*Star*, 3 August: 2), and *The Globe* reported that six local branches of the Swastika Club had been formed in the East End (2 August). On 3 August, the *Star* reported an attack was expected “. . . by a gang allegedly composed of Hebrews” on a small confectionary store believed to serve as the headquarters of the Swastika Club — a charge that B. Ganter, one of the store’s proprietors, denied:

While Ganter was speaking, youths in threes and fours, lured by the report of trouble, drifted in and out of the store, and congregated in the room at the back. As they passed each other, the Hitler salute, palm upraised, was jocularly exchanged. (3 August:1)

On August, according to *The Globe*, about one hundred members of the

## Swastika Club:

held a meeting on the boardwalk at the foot of Hammersmith Ave. at which leaders of the movement outlined their views and told of their plans for an orderly and strictly legal campaign to clean up the beaches (5 August:2).

But trouble was anticipated. The *Star* of 5 August reported that both sides appeared prepared for disorder over the weekend. Spokesmen claimed the Swastika Club membership was nearing one thousand and:

Swastika emblems will be flaunted on the east-end beaches over the holiday in greater numbers than ever before, despite the fact that over 3,000 Jews are scheduled to collect in various picnics at Kew Beach. (5 August:1)

Club members described to the *Star* their plans for the holiday, which involved “under-cover men in case somebody should start trouble” (5 August:1).

On the Jewish side, a group of boys had organized themselves to parade the beaches with the intention of preventing disorder. Instead of the swastika, they would wear the maple leaf emblazoned on their sweatshirts.

Mayor Stewart’s urging that citizens live up to the high ideals of the British race proved insufficient to prevent confrontation over the holiday weekend. On Sunday, 7 August, a series of clashes erupted in Kew Gardens. Reported the *Toronto Daily Star*:

Sullen clouds of tense racial feeling, brooding over the east end water front for days, burst during the weekend, and enveloped in a series of clashes and near riots, thousands of Torontonians who flocked to the beaches for pleasure, and for the “thrills” which they found abounded. Trouble was in the air, and it required only the appearance of the Swastika sign to make it all too actively tangible. Throughout the turmoil, the small swastika badge, emblem of the rapidly growing club, bobbed and eddied as gangs of non-Gentiles, incensed by the Hitlerism which they charged it symbolized, pounced on wearers. They tore sweatshirts on which the sign was emblazoned from the backs of youths, and forced them to seek shelter in nearby houses. (8 August:1).

According to the newspaper accounts, appearances of the swastika emblem was the cue for trouble. And, as *The Globe* reported:

Badges were in evidence on every hand. Some wore the round nickel button with the enamelled emblem on it. Others displayed armbands, some had the emblem painted on their sweat shirts and sweaters, while still others had the emblem painted on their chests. In some instances, even young ladies had the emblem pinned on their bathing suits. (7 August:2).

Several of our respondents claimed to have participated in the violent clashes at Kew Beach that weekend. One reported:

So, now my brothers and a bunch of other guys, they got about two or three trucks and they loaded them up with guys, and they went out there right on to the beach. And there were slug fests there all the time.

Another interviewee described his involvement:

All of a sudden these little *shiksalach* [Gentile girls] started running around with swastikas on the front of their bathing suits and this was the big in-thing down there. And the boys went down and they put their trunks on and they wore swastikas. And if they didn't wear them on their trunks, they put them on their chests. And this became — one week, the second week, all week long. The papers started playing it up and so we did a similar thing. We drove out there and we ran up on the beach and we tore the bathing suits off these girls, stripped them completely, we did everything. We took bats, not real baseball bats, but we took little wooden paddles like. And we paddled their rear-ends for doing this and all that. They were screaming bloody murder. And we called them all Hitlerites. You know, anti-semites. And this caused a furor in the paper.

To prevent the outbreak of larger-scale violence, the police in attendance urged and, on occasion, insisted that club members remove the swastika badges from their clothing.

Yet the 9 August *Star* reported that the Swastika movement was spreading and that Mr. Ganter, spokesman for the organization, claimed “thousands of sympathizers have made out applications for membership” (9 August:7). Also on 9 August, Mayor Stewart called a conciliation conference of representatives of the Swastika Clubs and leaders of the League for the Defense of Jewish Rights. Reported the *Jewish Standard*:

Firm and vigorous in his endeavour to preserve “peace and good government in Toronto”, Mayor Stewart issued a strong ultimatum to the Swastika Club leaders, threatening them with court action if their demonstrations tending to provoke disturbances did not cease. His Worship brought the hearing to a head when at the behest of Rabbi S. Sachs, chairman of the Jewish League, he requested B.M. Ganter and H.W. MacKay, Swastika spokesmen, to ask their organization to give up the swastika emblem which symbolized intolerance and cruelty”. (5 August:15).

The club representatives refused to promise that the group would abandon the emblem. They did agree to report the request and promised it would be considered.

On Friday, 11 August, The *Toronto Daily Star*'s headline on page 1 announced: “Swastika Club will Give Up Emblem.” The announcement was made at a news conference in the Mayor's office attended by Ganter representing the Swastika Clubs. The *Globe* reported:

Ganter, it is said, informed the Mayor that prominent residents of the beaches had come forward with an offer of financial and moral support in the formation of an organization to carry on the work commenced by the Swastika Clubs, and also that the emblem and the name would be abandoned in favour of another which had not yet been chosen.(12 August:2)

By August, it appeared that the Jewish community would henceforth be spared the indignity of witnessing the swastika emblem at the beaches, and that

the daily press coverage of the Swastika Club's activities and Jewish communal leaders' reactions to them was over.

But more was yet to come. On Monday, 14 August, Toronto papers announced that a circular had been distributed throughout the province publicizing a Swastika rally planned for Kitchener that evening.<sup>16</sup> The circulars were signed O. E. Becker, styled "commander" who declared that no Jews would be admitted to the meeting.

Addressed to the "Citizens of Kitchener and Waterloo County", the circular proclaimed a declaration of war "against Marxism, Communism and Bolshevism" whose adherents (immigrants all) were trying to reduce Canada to despair and chaos.<sup>17</sup> In interviews with the press, Becker unhesitatingly extolled the virtues of Mussolini and Hitler.

Not much came of the Kitchener rally and Commander Becker was deported to Germany some two weeks, later thereby ending the short-lived existence of the Swastika Club in that city as well as in Toronto.

### **The Swastika Clubs as Precipitating Factors**

Although the Swastika Clubs existed under that name in Toronto for a relatively short time — less than two weeks — their presence attracted enormous attention and had considerable influence. Whether they were Nazi-sponsored, Nazi-inspired, or simply the work of thoughtless prejudiced individuals would make a fascinating study. More to the point of this study, however, is the way in which they were perceived. Many Jewish communal leaders believed they represented an obvious attempt to assist Hitlerism in gaining a foothold in Canada.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the Jewish community at large, a people already battered by the prejudice of the surrounding society, generally agreed with this perception. The use of the swastika emblem clearly played an important role in this interpretation of reality. As Rabbi S. Sachs, chairman of the League for the Defense of Jewish Rights, explained at the Mayor's meeting on 9 August:

You know the power of an emblem. The swastika today is accepted throughout the civilized world as the emblem of Hitlerism. No longer does it mean good luck. It means bad luck. To Jewish people the swastika is the symbol of a wild beast crouching over 600,000 people, sucking their blood. Look what the swastika did. It brought "Hail Hitler" signs, brought the Fascist salute, and many things you didn't intend. (9 August: 1)

Given this perception of the Jewish community, Mayor Stewart was quite correct in believing that the presence and activities of the Swastika Club presented an unsettling situation. Noting the tensions and sporadic outbreaks of violence they had caused, he said "It would not take a very great spark to start

a conflagration in the city that you wouldn't put out in a day'' (*Toronto Daily Star*; 12 August:7). Unfortunately, the next few days would see his fears materialize.

### IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF THE RIOT

Although the appearance of swastikas in the Beaches provoked an active response from a number of young Jews from the Spadina/College area, the police managed to contain the threat of large-scale violence. In part, the very distance of Kew Beach from the Jewish areas militated against a large-scale outbreak of hostilities. The Jewish boys who went to the Beaches area to challenge the Swastika Clubs were far from home and had little chance of getting reinforcements should trouble in fact occur. Christie Pits, on the other hand, was very close to the edge of the Jewish ghetto. The neighbourhood around the park was mostly inhabited by lower-middle and working-class people of British extraction and of the Protestant faith. Many of them had been severely affected by the depression, and a large percentage, especially of the youths, had been unemployed for some time. At the time, the Jews were migrating northward and had nearly reached Bloor and Christie Streets; thus, the actions of the Pit Gang can be understood as a defensive response to a perceived threat to their territory by upwardly mobile "foreigners"

Furthermore, it is not surprising that the riot erupted on the occasion of a baseball game between a local team (St. Peter's) and a visiting team (Harbord Playground). Our respondents emphasized how important local sports, particularly baseball, were to the youth of Toronto during the depression years. S. Armstrong, head of the playgrounds for the City of Toronto, encouraged sports and athletics, in part as a way of keeping the boys out of trouble during this all-too-troubled period.

At least one of our respondents believes that inter-team rivalry had more to do with the riot than political anti-semitism:

But whether this gang was consciously anti-semitic; I don't think they had enough brains for it . . . Ya, I think the important thing of this whole thing really is that . . . I doubt very much if anybody in that group really, really had a hand on anti-semitism as we know it today. I doubt it. That there was resentment, ya. But I think it was based on local sport pride . . . The peculiar thing that impressed me about them [members of the Pit Gang] was, that I played hockey for Essex Playground and I played hockey for St. Peter's Church [and] this gang would turn out in support, you know, they were fans of local [teams] like Essex Playground . . . and St. Peter's. It's quite possible that somebody, somebody actually from a Fascist organization, painted the sign? Now, I don't think that without that sign, I have grave doubts if the Christie Pit Gang would have done anything.

He went on to say that the members of the Pit Gang were always interested in creating trouble. If the swastika could be employed to that end, he said, they

wouldn't hesitate to employ it. But this differs, our respondent believes, from a fervently-held political belief in anti-semitism. (He added, however, that many of Hitler's brownshirts may have been more interested in creating trouble than in acting from a consistent political anti-semitism).

A former resident of Clinton Street who observed the riot felt that anti-semitism was indeed the major issue. He explained:

Unless you lived in those times you wouldn't know, but there was an under . . . there was an atmosphere of hatred towards Jews, anti-semitism, in an area which was largely Waspish. And there used to be trouble in this same area between the Catholics and . . . There used to be Catholic troubles, you know, a lot of Orange people lived in that area.

For many young people, of course, ethnic rivalries compounded territorial rivalries that surfaced on playing fields. St. Peter's was a Catholic team, although by no means exclusively composed of Catholics. The majority of players on the Harbord side were Jewish. A number of them also played hardball for the Lizzies (Elizabeth Playground — coached by the legendary Bob Abate), one of the best amateur ball clubs in Toronto during the thirties. Both the Lizzies and Harbord Playground were generally thought of as "Jewish" teams, and the press often so identified them.<sup>19</sup>

As we have seen, Harbord and St. Peter's had played the first game in the series on the Monday of that week, and sporadic violence erupted among the spectators during the course of that game:

During a junior softball playoff, to which Harbord Playground, a Jewish team, met St. Peter's, a huge swastika emblem sewn in white cloth on a black sweater coat was hoisted by a gang, to the accompaniment of "Hail Hitler." The Jewish players were incensed . . .

After the game, won by Harbord, the gang held the emblem high and swarmed on the field. Many had clubs made of sawed-off broom handles. They gave their club yell again,<sup>20</sup> and gathered around the Jewish players. Spectators thought a fight would follow.

Later, the gang met and decided to paint a sign on the roof of the club house. A collection was taken up to provide paint. A member left and returned with a half pint tin. The youths waited until the attendants left the park, then two of them climbed the roof and painted the sign, amid cheers from the others on the ground.

Questioned, they admitted that no connection existed between the Beaches Swastikas and themselves. The club has no membership cards or fees, but is merely formed by the gang which frequents the park, they explained . . .

"We want to get the Jews out of our park," they said . . .

The Jewish boys promise that there will be trouble when they play there on Wednesday evening. (*Toronto Daily Star*, 15 August:1)

Despite the Pit Gang protestations, the Jewish community felt this was a continuation of the activities of the Beaches Swastika Clubs.

Whether an actual connection existed is impossible to tell in retrospect. The Pit Gang may simply have learned of these actions through the extensive reporting and discussion of them in the press,<sup>21</sup> or through the rumours that were circulating through the city. Another possibility is that a few of the Beaches Swastikas had come to the Willowvale Park area and with or without the knowledge of certain members of the Pit Gang, acted as provocateurs. Several of the people we interviewed suggested this as a likely possibility. One respondent who had grown up in the area and knew the members of the Pit Gang doubted that they could have dreamed up the swastika sign on their own. In his words:

Jews were outsiders; they were good bait and that was it . . . The atmosphere of the city of this particular time was one of which this Pit Gang would be encouraged to, in my opinion sort of be anti-semitic . . . It was just young drop-outs with nothing better to do. And if you tell me that there was a swastika, that was enough to lead them that way.

(Question: I gather then that you feel that this swastika was really prepared by somebody else outside the Pit Gang?)

I would think so, I would really think so. I don't think that gang had enough brains to do it.

(Question: But they certainly would have been drawn into it?)

Absolutely, absolutely. It would be like Fascist Hitler's hoodlums, you know. It was fun to beat up people.

Another respondent, who was even closer to the Pit Gang, was even more suspicious of outside influence:

They blamed the Pit Gang for the thing (the riot), but there was a lot of other people that were around there the first night, the first game was started that I never saw there before. And I suspected that they were from the German Bund . . . But there was somebody in the park that night during the first game; there were strange people. And they had caused some trouble, yelling "Heil Hitler" . . . A lot of the Christie Pit Gang were in on it, you know. They were down there that night. And some of those guys were just looking for a fight. Been drinking rubbing alcohol, you know, things like that.

It is highly unlikely that the German Bund was responsible for inciting the Christie Pits riot.<sup>22</sup> A more likely source of provocateurs, one a number of our respondents suggested, would have been the Swastika Club of Kew Beach, especially those members, such as H. MacKay, who proved actively anti-semitic.

There are several arguments for outside agitators having been involved in the initial stages of the riot. The "Heil Hitler" epithets shouted on the evening of the first game and repeated at the conclusion of the second game were not the usual fare for the lads who made up the Pit Gang. One would have expected them to use more homegrown slurs, such as "dirty Jew", "Sheenie", and

“Kike”. Further, the painting of the words “Hail Hitler” (note the spelling<sup>23</sup>) and the swastika on the club house roof on Monday night were a close copy of the sign that appeared in front of the Balmy Beach Canoe Club two weeks before. The white swastika on the sweater also follows the Beaches Swastikas’ pattern of using the emblem on shirts and sweaters.

On the other hand, one can argue that the members of the Pit Gang would have been familiar with the Hitler phenomenon, which had been recent and constantly in the news. They would almost certainly have known about the goings-on at the at the Beaches, and they would have seen in the swastika emblem an easy way of provoking a reaction from the Jewish boys.

That local boys incited the riot is unquestionable. The newspapers reported that John Adams had himself sewn the swastika onto his sweater, and a respondent saw him waving it around during the game on Monday evening. All of the boys arrested were members of the Pit Gang. One of them was caught with paint still fresh on his hands from having made one of swastika emblems; the others readily admitted having been his accomplices. What we shall never know is the extent of the relationship between this provocative behaviour and that of the Beaches Swastikas or any other anti-semitic group.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF RUMOUR**

Clearly, rumour was vitally important in the genesis of the Christie Pits riot. This is not surprising since many analysts have repeatedly emphasized rumour as playing an integral role in the organization of riots.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of who introduced the anti-Jewish taunts into the Monday game at Christie Pits, members of the Pit Gang were not slow in picking up the message that this was an excellent way to cause trouble. From the point at which they painted the roof of the club house, rumour became the force that brought out large numbers of both Jewish and anti-Jewish supporters to the second game on Wednesday.

When asked why they went to the Pits that evening, many of our respondents answered that they had heard there would be trouble:

Jewish boys used to hang around that corner [Spadina/College]. And when there was talk of this, it had got to the point where there would be something like this happening, so it ran like wildfire. Just as fast as they were able to get their men, we heard about it. They come into the poolroom. ‘‘There’s going to be trouble at Christie Pits and this is lining up and that is lining up and they’re going to be there, the anti-semites.’’

As I remember within no time at all, almost by magic, because I don’t know how the message got to the Spadina and College district. At that time the restaurant at the corner of Spadina and College was called the Goblin Restaurant and trucks came to the front of the restaurant and boys from the district hopped onto these trucks.

There was a restaurant . . . it was called the Goblin on Spadina Ave., . . . west side of Spadina Ave., just south of College . . . Phone calls went in, and then the word spread and even old timers, the ones that the immigrants themselves that were, they already had grown children. These guys had trucks . . . We jumped in their trucks, they even sent over, a truck over to the "Ward" to gather . . . In the Ward we hung around a place . . . Rotenburg had a little store at the corner of Elizabeth and Gerard . . . He had a little grocery store and that was also a hangout . . . And even the Italians, I remember guys, there was Charlie Difalco, there was the Romano's, they jumped on the trucks and all out to Christie Pits. And we handled that so beautifully.

One day I'm having lunch and in walks Freddie Hamilton . . . So he comes over with a plate of sandwich and a drink and there was no waiters in those days in Shopsy's. He said "Can I sit down?" I said "Sure, sit down Fred, I'm lonesome as hell. Come on what's doing?" He says, "Well, I'll tell you something . . . Go up to Christie Pits. There's going to be one hell of a row there."

When questioned further about their sources of information, many respondents were quite vague, offering statements such as "well, word kind of just got around" or "somebody called the pool hall" or even "I don't know how I knew, but I knew."

That these rumours about what had happened on the Monday evening and what was going to happen on the Wednesday evening were widespread in the community is highlighted by the fact that on Tuesday the Secretary of the Toronto Amateur Softball Association, Jack Turner, appealed to the Toronto Police to take action to prevent a violent confrontation at the second game. An editorial in the *Toronto Daily Star* two days after the riot referred angrily to this forewarning:

Chief Draper had, owing to the rumours of the trouble that was brewing, been requested by letter to provide additional police protection for the occasion. This extra protection was not provided. No doubt if the request had been based on the fear that somebody was going to make a speech in Willowvale Park horse, foot and artillery would have been there to prevent the speech and drive everybody out of the valley. (18 August:6)<sup>25</sup>

Within the Jewish community, it appears that two different groups responded to two different sets of rumours. The first set of rumours originated after the incidents at Monday night's game. As *Der Yiddisher Zhurnal* put it: "The rumour was spread that the same gang that upset the Jewish players with a swastika and yelled 'heil Hitler' would seek to make trouble this time as well." (17 August:1).

The people who responded to this rumour did so by organizing in advance for trouble and by making sure they got to the Pits before the beginning of the ballgame. To a large extent these were Jewish boys loosely referred to as the Spadina Avenue Gang. Frequenters of the pool halls and restaurants in the Spadina/College area, they were considered 'tough guys' both within and without the Jewish community. (In fact, their number included many amateur

boxers, several of whom went on to become professional fighters.) Scores of these boys, perhaps more, went to the park in cars and trucks before the beginning of the game on the strength of the rumour circulating since the Monday night game.

In addition, another group of boys, perhaps even larger than the first, went up to the Pits, but only *after* the trouble began Wednesday night. As soon as the fighting broke out, a number of Jewish youths, either on their own initiative or at the behest of others in the park, carried the word to the Spadina/College area. (The bicycle trip from the Pits to the corner of Spadina and College takes less than ten minutes.) As the news travelled that “Jews are being attacked”, the untrue rumour spread that at least one Jewish boy had been killed in the fighting.

The rumour of fighting and a death sent a second wave of Jewish youths rushing to the Pits. As reported on the front page of *Der Yiddisher Zhurnal* on the day following the riot:

In the city the attacks called forth many claims which could not be substantiated and which were exaggerated. The editorial office was bombarded with telephone calls all evening and into the night concerning those killed or those who died from their wounds.

Many Jews who telephoned the editorial office wanted not only information but advice as to what they should do. One could sense from some of the questions, that those people were living in a pogrom atmosphere. And it was necessary to go to some lengths to calm those people down.

*Der Yiddisher Zhurnal* reported: “From every street, cars and trucks with mostly Jewish youth began to speed their way there” [to the park]. (17 August: 1) Many of those who rode the crest of this second wave to the Pits arrived during a lull in the fighting. As a respondent told us:

It was the height of the depression. Very few people worked. I happened to be at work at the time — I worked at Spadina and Grange. When I got to the corner — I was walking home — I lived on Bathurst Street, they says come on. So we all got into trucks and when we got to Christie Pits all we saw . . . They had a refreshment stand. On top of the refreshment stand, on top of the roof there was a big, big, large swastika. But we had nobody to fight. It was a shadow. We went up there and we fought ghosts.<sup>26</sup>

In considering the role of rumour in the Christie Pits riot, the contemporary press and our respondents naturally emphasized its importance to the Jewish participants. Yet it is clear that rumour also played an important part in the actions of the Pit Gang and their supporters. Since the core members of the gang planned the intimidation that triggered the riot, rumour was obviously not a direct influence upon them. Yet whether outside agitators were present or not, rumour from the earlier incidents in the Beaches probably played some part in the mindset of these boys. At the Pits, rumour was certainly responsible for

drawing into the web of violence the large number of local youths who had only peripheral contact with the core of the Pit Gang.

Nor did rumour stop with the riot. On the following night, rumours of renewed Jewish incursion into the area of Christie Pits ran freely among youths in the vicinity of the park. On Friday, 18 August, *The Globe* reported: "A couple of times during the night rumours spread that the Jews had arrived and considerable excitement prevailed until investigation proved that such was not the case".

Rumour affected not only the warring youths of both sides but also the police, who were certainly pressured from above to prevent any repetition of the incident. The same issue of *The Globe* reported the scene at Christie Pits the night after the riot:

About four thousand people were gathered in the park watching a lacrosse game, and after the contest was over a large number waited around anticipating excitement. Five constables were at the park about this time, and when it looked for a time as if something might develop a call was put in for reserves. Besides the twenty uniformed constables, several plainclothesmen were scattered among the crowd. By 10 o'clock the park and the streets within the vicinity were almost entirely cleared of thrill seekers, and police were able to breathe easier.(1)

## Conclusion

The Christie Pits riot served as a violent culmination to a series of anti-semitic incidents in which the swastika symbol provided the focal point. Irrespective of the intended meaning of this symbol, Jews interpreted its flagrant use as a categorical assault on their person/psyche by virtue of their ethnic membership. As we saw, the Mayor of Toronto hoped that since the city was rooted in British values, traditions and ideals, the friction generated by the swastika symbol would dissipate on its own. He was proven wrong. The organizers of the Swastika Clubs in the Beaches backed down on their use of the symbol, but the leaders of the Pit Gang, perhaps urged by outside agitators, picked it up and employed it as an instrument in their running quarrel with the young Jews of Spadina Avenue. Warning sparks were evident, but the Chief of Police was either unable or unwilling to modify the existing institutional arrangements to accommodate the rumour that violence would erupt at the Wednesday evening baseball game.

In recent years, ethnic relations in Canada have attracted considerable attention, partly because of a growing realization that our society continues to single out members of visible minorities for unfavourable differential treatment. Analyses of ethnic relations must attend not only to the processes underlying diverse groups' harmonious relationships and successful

integration into the larger society, but also to sequences of events resulting in inter-ethnic tensions and strife. In their analysis of prejudice, Allport and Postman suggest that the culmination of violence is typically preceded by a sequence of steps — conditions that remove the brakes that normally exist between verbal aggression and overt violence.<sup>27</sup> Collective ethnic violence represents the most serious form of ethnic conflict and signifies, perhaps, the most extreme kind of accommodation by which inter-ethnic tensions are mediated. As such, the processes resulting in such action require thorough investigation. We hope to have made a beginning by our analysis of the Christie Pits riot.

## NOTES

1. In a separate paper, we intend to write an account of the “natural history” of the project. It will describe not only the challenges we encountered in finding respondents, but also the difficulties we confronted in asking people to recall an event that occurred some fifty years ago, and how we attempted to overcome them.
2. The swimming pool which now occupies a considerable area in the northwest of the park was constructed in the 1950’s.
3. A hardball game between Vermont and Native Sons had been played in the northeast diamond. Upon its conclusion, a large number of spectators moved over to the northwest diamond to watch the final innings of the softball game between Harbord Playground and St. Peter’s.
4. One of the fascinating things about the reporting of the riot is the great difference among the four major Toronto papers in the presentations of the “facts” and between the big four and the Yiddish press. This topic will form the subject of a future paper.
5. On the same evening a senior playoff game was also played in Christie Pits. One of the largest crowds in the park’s history was on hand for it. (*Toronto Daily Star*, 15 August, 1933; *Mail and Empire*, 15 August, 1933).
6. The *Toronto Daily Star* reported that 10,000 people were in the park that evening. The *Mail and Empire* put the figure at “more than 8,000”. With no intention of diminishing the seriousness of the riot, we are deliberately providing estimates lower than those reported by the newspapers at that time. Our respondents indicated that the figures reported in the press were inflated.
7. In another paper we plan to investigate the role of the police in the Christie Pits riot in greater detail.
8. The relationship between the Jewish and Italian communities, in particular

the relationship between Jewish and Italian youths, was generally cordial and supportive. There were several reasons for this. They were both immigrant groups, sharing similar life circumstances in the same poor neighbourhoods. And both groups were outsiders, experiencing discrimination and bigotry at the hands of the Wasp establishment and British majority. One of our respondents, an Italian-Canadian who went to the Pits with his friends to support the Jewish boys, described the anti-Italian sentiment in Toronto at that time:

The Italians the same thing. They'd call you wop, ya. As a matter of fact we even made up a song about the Italians . . . "When I first come to this country people called me dago man, long time ago they make me feel just like and empty banan. first they called me Tony Spagoni, then they'd say you're full of macaroni. now itsa biga shame they gimme the nickname. why don't you tell them to stop. stop, stop. Why don't the Irish cop tell them to stop. First they called me Tony, you're full of macaroni, now they call me wop." Actually, this is how it was. You lousy wop.

9. Goldstein was initially not involved in the riot. He was at a lacrosse practice at the park that evening and became involved only after encountering a group of hostile Gentiles. In the course of arguing with them he was set upon by the group and knocked unconscious. He was rescued by Joe Cancelli and two other friends who carried him to a house on Christie St. (which, by coincidence, turned out to be the home of his sister-in-law). He was later taken to the Toronto Western Hospital.
10. From the *Toronto Daily Star* and *Evening Telegram*, 17 August, 1933. Slight and inconsequential differences appear in the two newspapers' versions of the Mayor's statement. The statement here is a composite of the two versions.
11. For example, in his statement the Mayor claimed that "the activities of the Swastika Club are being looked into by the city, provincial and Dominion police". We have been in touch with the Metropolitan Toronto Police, the Ontario Provincial Police, the Solicitor General of Ontario, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. From the first and latter two we have had full co-operation in our research. The Commissioner of the O.P.P. was unwilling to co-operate with our research in any way. However, Solicitor General George Taylor assured us that no records of the riot or of the Swastika Clubs exist in the files of the O.P.P. The R.C.M.P. turned up nothing in their records of the riot, the Swastika Clubs, the arrested, or anything related to the riot. The Metropolitan Toronto Police were able to furnish us with only one document from the Police Commission; it treats the riot in Christie Pits in a paragraph in the general context of trouble in Toronto's parks during that summer. A thorough search in the archives of

the City of Toronto turned up nothing.

12. Harris explained the hunting knife in his possession as a piece of professional equipment required by his job as a fishing guide in the Peterborough area.
13. On 7 July the Commissioner of Parks sent a memo to the Superintendent of Parks for the Eastern District:

We have been requested to place a limited number of picnic tables under the trees in Kew Gardens . . . Please report if, in your opinion, it would be advisable to make provision there for next year. (Toronto City Archives)

The response to this memo, dated 12 July, stated:

I beg to report that owing to the increased demand for accomodation I respectfully recommend that an additional 20 tables be constructed in 1934. (Toronto City Archives)

14. The rest of the statement read, in part:

. . . the people of Toronto, including several prominent Hebrew associations, have, through the source of anonymous phone calls, letters, etc., been given an entirely wrong impression as to the aim of our organization . . .

Conditions of membership: All members must be over the age of 18 years: members of either sex will be accepted, regardless of nationality or creed; members must be residents of the district in which their local is formed; members must pledge themselves to live up to all the aims of the organization.

Aims: It is the aim of the Swastika Club, by assisting the civic authorities, to exclude from their local district all obnoxious and undesirable elements who tend to destroy the natural beauty and the property value of the residential districts of Toronto . . .

The Swastika Club members may be identified by Swastika crosses stenciled on sweat shirts, bathing suits, beach pyjamas, or other wearing apparel. The official emblem of the Swastika Club is a scarlet Swastika cross engraved and enamelled on a nickel shield.

We hope by the displaying of our badge in considerable numbers to discourage any objectionable element which creeps into a district in spite of the strictest supervision of parks, beaches, ravines and other beauty spots of our city.

The Swastika Club will gladly arrange a committee for the purpose of discussing our organization, its aims, etc., with civic authorities or any private or representative body.

15. Many Jewish communal leaders believed that the most effective treatment of outbursts of anti-Semitism was to ignore them. For example, Edmund Scheuer, a prominent Jewish citizen stated:

I think that too much importance — at all events, too much publicity — has been given to these unfortunate Swastika incidents. My personal advice to the young Jewish people is to remain calm, to avoid any kind of provocation, and most important of all to refrain from taking the law into their own hands. Our Canadian laws — thank God! — are just, our police excellent and well able to protect any class of citizens from being molested by

hoodlums (*Toronto Daily Star*, 9 August: 1).

Samuel Resnick, a noted Jewish citizen of Toronto, remarked:

We are not afraid of the Nazi influence in Canada. . . . If these agitators were left alone, I am sure their activities would die a natural death in a few weeks. (*Ibid.*)

Added Dr. S. J. Woolfson:

A childish movement, it is based on exhibitionism rather than on fundamental principles. No matter what they say, it is indirectly an attack upon the Jews. The quickest way to overcome it is to totally ignore it. (*Ibid.*)

16. Whereas *The Globe* announces that “Swastika Rally Planned,” the *Toronto Daily Star* informed its readers on the first page that “German Emigrant Forms Kitchener Nazis.” Most dramatic was the headline in the Tuesday, August 15th edition of *Der Yiddisher Zhurnal*: “Hitlerite S.S. Troups Are Established in Toronto.”
17. Both Ganter and MacKay were listed on the Kitchener program, but Ganter disclaimed any familiarity with the scheduled meeting. MacKay initially stated that he had no intention of presiding at the Kitchener meeting as announced but later in the day declared that he would assume the chair. “I am not representing the Toronto Swastika,” he said “as they have no connection with the Kitchener affair, officially” (*Toronto Daily Star*, 14 August:3). Of course, the connection could not be official. After all, the Toronto Swastika Clubs were officially no more.

MacKay now switched his affiliation to a new organization that was established following the demise of the Swastika Clubs, built on Fascist lines and committed to the same principles as Hitler’s S.S. troops. He said Ganter had no right to declare the Swastika Clubs would cease using the club’s name; moreover, he accused Ganter of working for the police (*Der Yiddish Zhurnal*, 15 August:1).

18. This view was publicly endorsed by a number of Gentile communal leaders. For example, Rev. D. N. McLachlan, secretary of the board of evangelism and social service of the United Church, said:

It is very unfortunate that the influence of Hitler should have gained a foothold in Canada. There is no room in this country for such pernicious doctrines as the Nazis are preaching. Unless this Swastika Club, so-called, is nipped in the bud, I have grave fears that we may have a serious situation on our hands (*Toronto Daily Star*, 8 August:3).

19. Interestingly after the riot, the press attempted to stress the mixed composition of these and other teams: Under the heading “Jews, Gentiles Play Together”, the *Toronto Daily Star* reported:

Amateur sport puts up no racial barriers if the personnel of many of Toronto’s most

successful baseball and basketball teams — with Jews, Gentiles, Italians and other central Europeans playing together — is any criterion. Irish boys in minority groups play on predominantly Jewish teams. Jews, singly and in groups, team with Gentiles, and throughout all there is no friction of racial character, according to sporting authorities, closely in touch with the teams . . .

Most striking examples of this inter-racial teamwork is seen in the Lizzie's basketball team, 1932 champions, the University of Toronto basketball team, Big Five champions last year, and the Arlington baseball team, leaders of the Greenwood Park Senior League, all of which have several races represented in their line-ups.

Playing on the Arlington team, which is predominantly Jewish, and managed by Harold "Skin" Gallander (a Jewish athlete who plays for the Lizzies' basketball team) are Jack O'Connor, Joe Hill (who plays softball for St. Peter's, one of the teams playing at Willowvale Park where the fracas occurred last night) Johnny Decker, and Herman Bush, an Italian who is rated one of the best pitchers in the city. There are nine Jewish boys on the team.

A sole Jewish member of the Native Sons' team, playing in the Western City League at Willowvale Park, is Myer Miller, while another similar example is that of Al Samuelson, pitcher for the Bain's Coal softball team in the Davisville Park senior league. Another is Sammy Rubin, who is the only Jewish member of an east end softball team in the Beaches League. (17 August:3)

20. One of our respondents who can recall experiencing trouble with the Pit Gang as far back as 1931 remembers the club yell as being "Nicky Oyup". He had no idea what the significance of this yell might have been.
21. Two weeks prior the *Mail and Empire* had published a picture of the Balmy Beach Canoe Club; a sign posted in front had painted on it a swastika and the words "Hail Hitler".
22. First, it was not officially formed until January 1934 (Wagner, 1981). Second, throughout its existence, it was careful not to get involved in activities that would alienate the majority of the German Canadian population and bring the full weight of the authorities down upon it (as had happened to the German American Bund). Moreover, all studies confirm that the Nazi government was still in the process of consolidating its power in Germany and that any agitprop in foreign countries was only in the planning stages.
23. The writing of the German word "Heil" as the English word "Hail" makes it unlikely that any native German speakers were directly involved in the incident — another argument against participation by members of the Bund or similar groups.
24. The theoretical formulation of rumour rests heavily on the work of Allport and Postman (1947). For empirical examples of the role of rumour in inciting riots, see Lieberman and Silverman (1965).
25. This last sarcastic point made in the editorial refers to the fact that police

reinforcements always seemed to be on hand to break up leftist gatherings in other parks. In fact, on the night of the riot the police had been much in evidence at an open-air rally of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. In the same editorial, the *Star* asserted:

On Tuesday evening at Allan Gardens, where somebody proposed to make a speech — we do not know who, nor does it matter — there were present, before the hour at which the meeting was about to take place, two policemen, eight motorcycle policemen, a dozen policemen in uniform and a number of plainclothesmen.

On Wednesday evening at Willowvale Park where, according to rumours which had spread all over the northwest part of the city, serious racial trouble was likely to occur at a baseball game only three policemen were present — the same number which is there on all occasions to keep an eye on the crowds attending amusements which occur simultaneously.

The lead story in *Der Yiddisher Zhurnal* echoed these sentiments:

The Mayor, the Parks Commission and Athletic Club and others warned the police that they could expect trouble in Willowvale Park. And the police did nothing. This accusation is heard on all sides.

Chief of Police Draper had received an early warning from the Parks Department that special police surveillance should be present at the game between Harbord Playground and St. Peter's teams in Willowvale Park. The Chief of Police admitted this at last night's meeting of the Police Commission, but he did not take it seriously. (17 August: 1)

In response, the *Toronto Daily Star* (18 August: 1) reported, the Spadina C.C.F. Club called for the resignation of the Chief of Police.

26. Cf. *Der Yiddisher Zhurnal*, which reported: "When they [the Jewish boys] arrived there [Christie Pits], everything was already over" (17 August: 1).
27. G. W. Allport and L. J. Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor*. (New York: Henry Holt, 1947)