

Alice in Shandehland: Scandal and Scorn in the Edelson/Horowitz Murder Case by Monda Halpern

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Alice in Shandehland

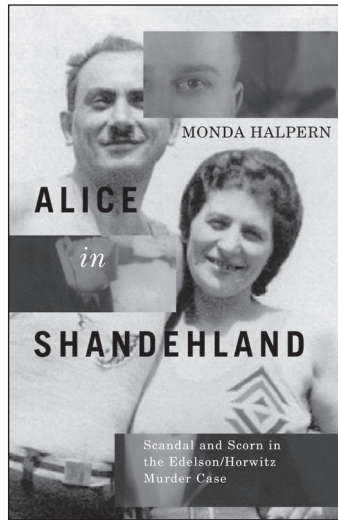
Scandal and Scorn in the Edelson/Horowitz Murder Case

by Monda Halpern

Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. 308 Pages, ISBN 9780773545595. \$39.95 Cloth. eBook available at various prices. (www.mqup.ca)

Monda Halpern begins the book, *Alice in Shandehland*, with the 1931 shooting and subsequent death of Jack Horowitz. Jack is the long-time lover of Alice Edelson, who is married to a “well respected” Ottawa jeweller, Ben Edelson. Jack Horowitz is married to Yetta and they have a daughter. The Edelsons have been married for twenty years and have seven children. Jack was killed by two gunshots at “a meeting” called to “settle the thing” (3) between Jack and Alice. It took place at the Edelson Jewellers offices, on the evening of November 24. As a result of the shooting, a sensational legal battle ensued, in which Ben was accused of killing Jack.

Both couples lived in the small and somewhat insular Lowertown and Sandy Hill Jewish communities in Ottawa. During the Depression-era, Jewish people living in these neighbourhoods faced “virulent expressions of anti-Semitism” and “bigotry” (46), despite their drive to become valued citizens in Canadian society. In this deep analysis of what was then known as an “infamous love triangle” (3), Halpern takes the reader through the details of everyday life in this closed immigrant community through the Edelson/Horowitz murder case. The trial of Ben Edelson provides a compelling lens through which to explore deeper issues



of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class in pre-Second-World-War Canada. My own mother used to read the endings of murder mysteries first (the “who did it” part) so that she could focus on the construction of the story, the human story. Halpern provides the “whodunit” details in the introduction, so that the reader is free to explore the “mystery” surrounding the shooting, as well as the subsequent

trial, which provides insight into the lived realities of early twentieth century immigrant communities’ experiences within modern Canadian society, with all of their assimilative tensions.

Halpern bases the book on an impressive collection of primary materials: newspapers articles; oral histories; photos, and court documents which provide insight into the Jewish community where the families lived, and where the shooting took place. She explores the courtroom trial proceedings and the responses by the Jewish and broader communities that expose Depression-era attitudes and notions of good citizenship, motherhood, masculinity and the central role of families. Halpern suggests that the broader Ottawa community’s responses to the trial were tied ultimately to the court’s response, which was to acknowledge that Ben’s “middle-class re-

spectability,” and the “betrayal he suffered” had earned him legal exoneration.

Alice, on the other hand is “shandeh” (a Yiddish word meaning “shamed”) for her actions as “an adulterous” wife as her behaviour is called into question as unrepresentative of her respectable community. The effort to blame Alice is strong, as her misbehaviour or “subversion of proper Jewish womanhood” challenges an immigrant community’s shared religious and cultural values, as well as their desperate need to “fit-in” and be perceived as law abiding. Historians have documented the deportations tied to labour activism and communist “sympathizers” after the First World War; well known to immigrant communities. As Halpern argues, it was an era when non-Anglo immigrants were deemed prone to ‘brutish behaviour’ and the trial risked using the community as an example of “depravity... rage, corruption, sexual debauchery or deceit” (5), all traits the Jewish community wanted to avoid being labelled.

The trial also reflects notions of female respectability. Alice is a mother and community member. The accusation is that she brought her husband to these actions because she had betrayed him, destroyed his respectable position, and that of the community, and caused all to suffer greatly. Halpern argues the case reflects an “unwritten law,” a Victorian doctrine, that supports a male, defending the virtue of a woman, in this case the right of Ben Edelson to “protect his property” (his wife) and her honour and place in the community, or as Halpern states, his right to “avenge his wife’s seducer” (9). The murder trial focuses more on the “misbehaviour” of Alice, whose morals and good judgement had gone astray, than the actual shooting by Ben, a successful male business community member. In the end, Ben is exonerated. Alice loses her lover and an honoured place within the community. Yetta, Jack’s wife, loses a husband and family provider. The Jewish community

and the city of Ottawa, move on, with their respectability perceived as still intact.

Halpern argues that Alice’s behaviour, made public by the trial, brought into question the tight knit, supportive and respectable Jewish community in which she lived. A victim of gender stereotyping, her “immoral” behaviour was viewed as the cause of her husband’s actions (she “drove” Ben to shoot Jack). The trial, and the judge’s comments, exposes the dominant male Anglo-Canadian bias of honour, respectability and good citizenship. Halpern notes the “indictment of Alice” was in keeping with the general climate of female scapegoating during the Depression, particularly faced by women in the workforce. Scholarship in both women’s and gender history have revealed how immigrant, ethnic and racialized women have had to embrace multiple identities in addressing expectations of multiple communities. In the book *Sisters or Strangers?*, Franca Icovetta notes that immigrant women “barred from genuine power and resources by virtue of racial or ethnic identity are indeed ‘strangers’ in a country where privilege and opportunity fall according to racist and sexist criteria” (7). The case reveals the complexities of balancing religious and cultural traditions within changing societal norms, a phenomenon that continues to be a challenge for immigrant communities today.

The case also reflects on current debates of sexual morality, gender bias, and women’s multifaceted lives. I highly recommend this book, both for a “good read,” as well as for a rigorously academic analysis of a Canadian social and legal landscape that is still with us: hierarchical, racialized, and gendered understandings of “morality” which continue to underscore our legal system, as well as how justice, or injustice, gets enacted.

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