

JEWISH POLICE INFORMERS IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD, 1880–1914

CHARLES VAN ONSELEN

University of Pretoria

ABSTRACT. *The great migration from the tsarist empire, sparked by the assassination of Alexander II, in 1881, saw two to three million east European Jews re-settling in the great cities of the Atlantic world before the First World War. Often discriminated against in labour markets, and socially marginalized in new environments, Russo-Polish males either persisted in, or resorted to, organized crime centred on the illicit sale of alcohol, professional gambling, and prostitution to survive. Atlantic states, however, were reluctant to employ Jews as uniformed police or detectives in their fight against syndicated crime. In order to overcome the challenge of ethnicized crime, law-enforcement agencies, like nineteenth-century tsarist administrations before them, employed informers. Jewish informers who, unbeknown to police handlers, were sometimes also psychopaths in an era before the condition was clinically identified, were used to infiltrate underworld structures. By nature, informing offered a short-term, unstable, existence fraught with unintended consequences for police and spies alike – thereby encouraging extraordinary geographical mobility amongst informers. Orthodox histories of law-enforcement agencies tend to focus on structural changes in police forces but a re-examination of the role of informers in organized crime should allow for the development of more subtle insights into the evolution of policing as a dynamic, interactive, social process.*

Then I was handed over to a heavy-set man. A cab waited outside the prison and we were driven to the station. We travelled in a Pullman car, and the man introduced himself as Detective-Sergeant [Charles Jacobs] ... *I asked him why he had not chosen a more honourable occupation and why he had to bring more spies into the world.* If he did not do it, someone else would, he replied. The police force was necessary; it protected society. Would I have dinner? ...

Over the dinner the detective referred to my youth and the life ‘such a brilliant girl, with such abilities’ had before her. He went on to say that I never would earn anything by the work I was doing, not even my salt. Why shouldn’t I be sensible and ‘look out for number one’ first? He felt for me because he was a *Yehude* himself. He was sorry to see me go to prison ... *His chief*[Thomas Byrnes] *had instructed him to tell me that my case would be quashed and a substantial sum of money presented to me if I would give way a little. Nothing much, just a short periodic report of what was going on in radical circles and among the workers on the East Side ...*

A horrible feeling came over me. The food nauseated me. I gulped down some ice-water from my glass and threw what was left into the detective’s face. ‘*You miserable cur!*’ *I shouted;*

‘not enough that you act as a Judas, you try even to turn me into one – you and your rotten chief! I’ll take prison for life, but no one will ever buy me!’
Emma Goldman, *Living my life*

I

The assassination of Tsar Alexander II, in 1881, and the pogroms it gave rise to, primed the pump for a mass exodus of Jews from Russian-Poland and the Pale of Settlement that continued for three decades. A drop in the cost of rail fares and a sharp fall in the price of steerage passages on over-traded international shipping routes saw two to three million Jews flee central and eastern Europe to join the great migration west in the ‘Age of capital’. Some sought a better life in Britain, France, or Germany, but most proceeded to the United States. Others ventured farther afield in the Atlantic world to Argentina, Brazil, and southern Africa.¹

Overwhelmingly God-fearing and law-abiding, many spoke Polish and Russian in addition to their mother-tongue, Yiddish. In their new settings they frequently encountered small, relatively well-assimilated, influential elements of middle-class Anglo- or German-Jewry. East Europeans nevertheless made significant, in some cases defining, contributions to the cultural, social, political, and economic development of societies despite the fact that most were semi-skilled, semi-literate, and lacking capital to start businesses in labour markets where they were the last hired and first fired.²

Harsh cultural and economic realities in unfamiliar surroundings shaped the struggles of east European immigrants bent on making a success in new, urbanized, environments. Contemptuous terms applied to low-class Polish and Russian Jews around the Atlantic during the great migration, such as ‘greeners’, ‘peruvians’, and ‘schnorrers’, testified to their marginalized status.³ The perils of failure – sometimes already evident in the old country where many had eked out an existence in the black economies of illicit alcohol-selling, professional gambling, or prostitution – were all evident. Every major city in the Atlantic world had its quota of arsonists, brothel-keepers, burglars, card-sharps, confidence tricksters, counterfeiterers, fraudsters, pickpockets, pimps, prostitutes, thieves, and ‘white slave’ traffickers. Not all, let alone most of them, were Jewish. All immigrant communities contributed to emerging underworlds.

¹ See Lloyd P. Gartner, ‘Jewish migration en route from Europe to North America: traditions and realities’, in M. Rischin, ed., *The Jews of North America* (Detroit, 1987), pp. 25–43. The wider context for the arguments that follow is sketched in C. van Onselen, ‘Jewish marginality in the Atlantic world: organized crime in the era of the great migrations, 1880–1914’, *South African Historical Journal*, 43 (Nov. 2000), pp. 96–137.

² Perhaps the most vivid portrayal of such struggles is to be found in A. Cahan’s novel, *The rise of David Levinsky* (New York, 1917). See also I. Howe (with K. Libo), *The immigrant Jews of New York, 1881 to the present* (London, 1976), pp. 154–70.

³ On ‘schnorrers’ see J. Wertheim, *Unwelcome strangers: east European Jews in imperial Germany* (New York, 1987), p. 6. On the less familiar ‘peruvian’ epithet, see below, n. 11.

This article is set against the backdrop of pockets of organized crime that emerged around morally sensitive issues governing access to, and control of, alcohol, gambling, and prostitution in the Atlantic world between 1880 and 1914. It seems that an indeterminate measure of anti-Semitism and other cultural factors combined to shape the personnel of law-enforcement agencies that failed to employ significant numbers of Jews in the struggle against ethnically constituted crime syndicates. Reluctant to recruit Jewish detectives and policemen, agencies relied instead on the services of professional informers and private detectives. Alienated, criminal, and secular, some of the latter appear to have had prior experience of informing in post-1881 tsarist Russia and manifested symptoms which, with the benefit of hindsight, can now be seen as being consistent with symptoms of psychopathy. Although the employment of Jewish marginals took place within self-limiting parameters, it nevertheless casts an eerie light on processes of acculturation, criminality, and justice during a period of accelerated social change.

II

The struggle by east Europeans to cast off their marginalized social status, assimilate, and acquire citizenship was complicated by pre-existing class structures and prejudices, and then exacerbated by the rapid development of organized Russo-Polish crime. By 1900, thousands of east European Jews profiting from the illicit sale of alcohol, professional gambling, prostitution, and 'white slave' trafficking had formed criminal associations in host societies including America, Argentina, Brazil, and the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR). Although most of these youthful, modernizing, states were constitutionally secular, political parties, and electoral politics were nevertheless strongly influenced by, if not definitively shaped by, prevailing Catholic or Protestant majorities.⁴

In Buenos Aires, commercial 'vice' and 'white slave' trafficking, primed by an influx of Russo-Polish gangsters from Rio de Janeiro in the late 1880s, became more tightly centralized in the 1890s and eventually acquired its most notorious

⁴ There is a vast literature on the rise of Jewish crime in the Atlantic world. Amongst many others see – for America – R. Cohen, *Tough Jews: fathers, sons and gangster dreams* (London, 1998); F. Cordasco and T. M. Pitkin, *The white slave trade and the immigrants: a chapter in American social history* (New York, 1981); A. Fried, *The rise and fall of the Jewish gangster in America* (New York, 1993); and J. W. Joselit, *Our gang: Jewish crime and the New York Jewish community, 1900–1940* (Bloomington, 1983); for Argentina, G. Bra, *La organización negra: la increíble historia de la zwi migdal* (Buenos Aires, 1999); D. J. Guy, *Sex & danger in Buenos Aires: prostitution, family and nation in Argentina* (London, 1991); A. Londres, *The road to Buenos Aires: the white slave traffic* (New York, 1928); and, especially, V. A. Mirelman, 'The Jewish community versus crime: the case of white slavery in Buenos Aires', *Jewish Social Studies*, 46 (1984), pp. 1–57; for Brazil, B. Kushmir, *Baile de máscaras, mulheres, justias e prostituição: as polacas e suas associacoes de ajuda mútua* (Rio de Janeiro, 1996); J. Lesser, *Welcoming the undesirables: Brazil and the Jewish question* (London, 1995), pp. 30–9; L. Medeiros de Menezes, *Os estrangeiros e o comércio do prazer nas ruas do Rio, 1890–1930* (Rio de Janeiro, 1992); on South Africa, C. van Onselen, 'Prostitutes and proletarians, 1886–1914', in *New babylon, new nineveh: everyday life on the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914* (Johannesburg, 2001), pp. 109–64.

and organized form with the establishment of the *zwei migdal* in 1907.⁵ In Johannesburg, the ‘American club’, a ‘pimps’ union’ constituted from ‘Bowery boys’ who had served criminal apprenticeships on New York City’s Lower East Side, controlled ‘organized vice’ between 1895 and 1899.⁶ After the South African War (1899–1902), the American club was supplanted by the ‘immorality trust’, a successor syndicate dominated by Polish and Russian Jews controlling gambling and prostitution outlets in the inner city.⁷ In New York, the pioneering Russo-Polish criminal organization was the Max Hochstim association which, in 1896, gave birth to the blandly named New York independent benevolent association.⁸ Although there were significant exchanges of information between gangsters in various centres and some movement between organizations, the associations remained autonomous. There was no grand international conspiracy of the sort posited in the infamous, forged, ‘Protocols of Zion’.

Devout Jews despised anti-social elements within the community yet, in perverse and unintended ways, their very abhorrence and rejection helped give rise to, and shape, criminal organization. Religious Jews, unwilling to see rites of passage extended to gangsters, or to countenance the presence of moral offenders in synagogues, sought to expel and marginalize criminals. The New York independent benevolent association and *zwei migdal* (the Warsaw burial society) both took on more definite shape when underworld elements – denied funerals by rabbis responding to pressure from congregants – were unable to find resting places in communal cemeteries. In Johannesburg, American club members were given so-called ‘donkey funerals’ and relegated to burial in a separate section of the Braamfontein cemetery.⁹

III

Legal and moral transgressions by Russo-Polish gangsters and more especially by those engaged in crimes against people rather than property brought opprobrium

⁵ E. J. Bristow, *Prostitution and prejudice: the Jewish fight against white slavery, 1879–1939* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 123–4.

⁶ Van Onselen, ‘Prostitutes and proletarians’, pp. 127–32. See also F. R. M. Cleaver (edited by ‘His Mother’), *A young South African: a memoir of Ferrar Mostyn Cleaver, advocate and veldcornet* (Johannesburg, 1913), pp. 2–4.

⁷ Commissioner of police to secretary, Transvaal police, 19 Aug. 1908, Pretoria, South African National Archives (SANA), South African Constabulary, vol. 23, file 8/96, draws reference to organized rejection by prostitutes of pimps linked to the Immorality Trust and notes ‘All of these men are Russian Jews who originally hail from Russian-Poland, but who has since established themselves in England and America.’

⁸ On the Max Hochstim association see F. Moss, *The American metropolis*, III (New York, 1897), pp. 160–70 and 215–20; and on the New York independent benevolent association, Bristow, *Prostitution and prejudice*, pp. 165–70. See also A. A. Goren, ‘Traditional institutions transplanted: the hevra kadish in Europe and America’, in Rischin, ed., *Jews of North America*, pp. 62–78; and Goren’s *Saints and sinners: the underside of American Jewish history* (The American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, 1988).

⁹ Bristow, *Prostitution and prejudice*, p. 140. On ‘donkey funerals’ – ‘burial outside sanctified cemetery land’, see Goren, *Saints and sinners*, p. 10.

on *all* Jews who, regardless of class, doctrinal, or ethnic differences, constituted a distinctive, non-Christian, minority in the eyes of the majority. While most Atlantic states were slow to respond to the challenge of organized crime and law-enforcement agencies reluctant to appoint officers drawn from the ranks of immigrant newcomers who would have given them the cultural and linguistic edges necessary to penetrate exotic underworld structures, it was often left to Jewish communal and religious leaders to initiate action against east European criminals. In cases where communally led initiatives lagged, or where actions by gangsters became intolerable, there was the danger of vigilante-style reaction from the public.

Between 1880 and 1914 there were numerous instances in Buenos Aires, Cardiff, Rio de Janeiro, and New York, when angry Jews turned on ‘unclean’ Russo-Polish pimps who were assaulted, harassed, jostled, or pressurized into leaving town. In New York, communal action assumed structured, institutionalized, form with the establishment of the *kehillah* or commune, in 1908, and, in 1912, its ‘bureau of social morals’. In public, the *kehillah*’s bureau mimicked the Rockefeller-financed ‘bureau of social hygiene’ but, privately, it was more like a law-enforcement agency replete with an intelligence-gathering capacity that informed legal as well as illegal actions against saloons, *stuss* houses and brothels on the Lower East Side.¹⁰

With pre-First World War states often unable or unwilling to lead the charge against east European organized crime and law-enforcement agencies either compromised, or lacking the detection and intelligence-gathering skills with which to infiltrate syndicates, police often had to be pressurized into taking action. The Witwatersrand gold mining region in the time of Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek offers an example of the nature and scale of the problem. After the discovery of gold, in 1886, the ZAR government, privileging its fruit- and grain-producing farming constituency pursued a non-racial policy permitting the sale of alcohol to semi-skilled white and unskilled black mineworkers alike. Johannesburg, a new Eldorado, attracted thousands of east European immigrants including hundreds of erstwhile *korchma* or canteen proprietors, and petty criminals. It was estimated that, by the mid-1890s, there were more than 7,000 impoverished Polish and Russian Jews in the city where they were collectively known as ‘peruvians’ – a contemptuous term as derisory as it was misleading.¹¹

¹⁰ Van Onselen, ‘Jewish marginality in the Atlantic world’, pp. 128–9; and A. A. Goren, *New York Jews and the quest for community: the kehillah experiment, 1908–1922* (New York, 1977).

¹¹ ‘Peruvian’ – a now largely archaic censorious, contemptuous, dismissive term of largely unknown provenance used by middle-class Gentiles and Jews alike to attribute boorish behaviour and/or a lack of cultural refinement to urbanizing, male, Polish, and Russian Jewish immigrant workers employed in low-status occupations, interacting largely with indigenous – usually black – peoples, in industrializing southern Africa during the era of the great Atlantic migrations, c. 1881–1914.

The term, in all probability an acronym, has an elusive etymology. Used primarily – but not exclusively – by South African Jews of real or imagined social standing and education of English, German, or Lithuanian origin to refer to those of lesser status, education, and income hailing from eastern Europe, it has been suggested that term may derive from ‘Peruvia’ – a distortion of the Latin

When, in 1896, the state, at the behest of a mining industry alarmed by the twinned issues of productivity and profit, changed policy, and prohibited the sale of alcohol to Africans, it sealed-off small-scale 'peruvian' entrepreneurs from the largest part of the market. The response was immediate.

Two decades before prohibition in America delivered windfall profits to Chicago's *mafioso*, hundreds of Russo-Poles in South Africa transformed themselves into syndicates bent on supplying the African market with illicit liquor. Wholesale bribery and corruption of the liquor squad ensured tip-offs of impending raids on elaborate fortifications protected externally by a system of strategically placed lookouts and spies. Internally, electric alarms, concealed doors, hatches, trapdoors, and underground passages made for near impenetrable strongholds. Rabbi Hertz and Emmanuel Mendelsohn, editor of the *Standard & Diggers' News* who had earlier led a campaign against the Bowery Boys and 'white slavery', sensed a broader undercurrent of anti-Semitism and found it

'Poruvia'. (See M. P. Grosman, 'A study in the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings in South Africa since the beginnings of the early nineties of the last century to 1903' (3 vols., Ph.D. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1973), p. 162.) First used in the *Johannesburg Times*, 1 Mar. 1896. See van Onselen, *New babylon, new nineveh*, pp. 81–2 and J. Sherman, 'Serving the natives: whiteness as the price of hospitality in South African Yiddish literature', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26 (Sept. 2000), pp. 505–21.

In similar 'top-down' but probably even more misleading fashion, it is implied, or suggested, that the term's origins might owe something to Baron Maurice de Hirsch's colonization scheme of 1891 which encouraged European Jewish settlement in Latin America. (See commentary by 'Corbett' in *The Owl* (Cape Town, 8 Feb. 1901).) But since use of the term pre-dates the scheme and Hirsch's Jewish colonization association's efforts were confined largely to Atlantic, east-coast, Argentina, rather than Pacific, west-coast, Peru, this does not appear to be a helpful or persuasive explanation.

It seems more likely that the origins of the acronym/word are to be found in the more remote lived experiences of first-generation Polish and Russian Jewish immigrants in southern African mining centres in the last quarter of the nineteenth century – a more 'bottom-up' explanation. In the diamond mining centre of Kimberley, the Polish and Russian Union – a Jewish social club founded in the 1870s – may have provided the etymological roots of the word. (See M. Sonnenberg, *The way I saw it* (Cape Town, 1957), p. 52; and M. Shain, *The roots of anti-Semitism in South Africa* (Charlottesville, 1994), pp. 27–8.) The term was widely used in Johannesburg after the discovery of gold, in 1886, to refer to unskilled east European Yiddish-speaking immigrants employed legally as store-assistants in concession stores serving African workers on mining properties, or to itinerant Jewish hawkers and traders. (W. F. Bailey, 'The native problem in South Africa', *National Review*, 28 (1896), p. 546.) After the prohibition on the sale of alcohol to Africans in the South African Republic, in 1898, the word was applied to lower-order Polish and Russian Jewish gangster-functionaries in illegal retail and wholesale liquor-selling gangs and syndicates (C. van Onselen 'Randlords and rotgut, 1886–1903: the role of alcohol in the development of European imperialism and southern African capitalism, with special reference to black mineworkers in the Transvaal republic', in *New babylon, new nineveh*, pp. 81–2 and n. 12, below).

It would appear that, although more solidly rooted in white South African culture than elsewhere in the western hemisphere, the term also found its way back north into the lexicon of contemporary Yiddish usage on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus, the term is recorded in the *Harkavy English–Yiddish dictionary* (New York City, 1910), p. 451, which would suggest its use in New York City's Lower East Side Jewish community. Similarly its use in London's Jewish East End is noted in J. Gross, *A double thread: growing up English and Jewish in London* (London, 2001), p. 29.

I would like to thank Veronica Belling, Susan Rich, and – especially – Milton Shain for generous advice and assistance in attempting to outline the etymology of the word.

difficult to intervene meaningfully in public debate. Between 1897 and 1899 criminal syndicates of fifty or more, bound by strong family ties and backed-up by the muscle-power of impoverished *landsleit* drawn from *shettlekh* in the old country, held the state and mining companies at bay along the length of the Witwatersrand until a successful vigilante campaign against ‘peruvians’ was launched by a mining house mouthpiece, *The Transvaal Leader*, in 1899.

But not even direct action by the *Leader*, backed by officers drawn from locally based law-enforcement agencies, could make headway against the most powerfully entrenched syndicates. In the case of the self-styled ‘Boss of Boksburg’, Samuel ‘Smooel’ Nathanson, success was achieved only when two out-of-town, Pretoria-based policemen supported by a specially recruited and then hastily re-trenched Jewish detective were brought in to close down Nathanson’s extensive east Rand business. So unusual was the operation, and so infuriated was Nathanson by ‘special detective’ Goldberg’s ‘treacherous’ behaviour, that it was said that the ‘boss’ was willing to pay £2,000 to get Goldberg ‘into trouble’ of a sort that can be imagined.¹²

In much the same way, it was often Jewish communal initiatives, buttressed by the efforts of slowly focusing state law-enforcement agencies, that helped restrict the supply of ‘white slaves’ recruited in European cities and destined for the core demand centres of Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro between 1890 and 1914.¹³

IV

Despite efforts to isolate and marginalize Jewish miscreants, organized crime centred on alcohol, gambling, and prostitution remained an enduring feature of port and inland cities around the Atlantic in the late nineteenth century. It was not, however, the only – let alone most important – problem facing centres with burgeoning immigrant populations. Industrialization, poverty, and unemployment gave rise to property, as opposed to people-related, offences on a scale that transcended ethnic boundaries and necessitated new policing methods. It is within this far broader context that one has to view the birth of the modern, pre-forensic, criminal investigation department (CID) in the era of mass migration.

Perhaps predictably, it was an American city, New York, that set the pace in establishing a dedicated criminal investigation department to counteract developing organized crime. In 1881, Thomas Byrnes pioneered the use of a CID to supplement the efforts of the New York police department (NYPD).¹⁴ Buenos Aires, long the second largest city in the Atlantic and would-be rival to New York, had a dedicated investigation facility in place by the late 1880s which increased in importance with the acceleration of mass immigration through the 1890s.

¹² Van Onselen, ‘Randlords and rotgut’, pp. 93–6.

¹³ Bristow, *Prostitution and prejudice*, pp. 29–47; and van Onselen, ‘Jewish marginality in the Atlantic world’, pp. 115–32.

¹⁴ J. Lardner and T. Reppetto, *NYPD: a city and its police* (New York, 2000), pp. 72–89.

In colonial southern Africa, host to a two-pronged mineral revolution in the nineteenth century, primary industrialization and law-enforcement were characteristically complex. The discovery of diamonds, in the Cape Colony in the late 1860s, and gold, in the ZAR in the mid-1880s, necessitated measures by the De Beers' company to prevent illicit diamond buying (IDB) and, farther north, on the Witwatersrand, the illegal sale of unwrought gold. In some ways the emergence of private and state detective agencies in Kimberley and Johannesburg, as in the United States with the Pinkerton agency, should be seen within the context of a leading capitalist sector and the lagging capacity of the state for law-enforcement.¹⁵

In Johannesburg, the state had a detective force in place by the late 1880s and deployed small, over-stretched, specialized units to combat the illicit sale of alcohol, gambling, and prostitution in the mid-1890s.¹⁶ Away from this cosmopolitan, urbanizing, nexus the introduction of specialized investigative units were, more typically, the by-product of an incoming post-war British administration bent on modernization and reconstruction. Cape Town, which had seen an influx of hundreds of Russo-Polish criminals during the war, had to wait until 1901 for the establishment of a CID to combat gambling and prostitution. So, too, did Bloemfontein, in the Orange River Colony, where scores of criminals, including leading east Europeans gangsters waited for hostilities to end before attempting to return to Johannesburg.¹⁷

By 1900, police around the Atlantic were using the CID or its equivalent to combat offences against 'public morals' by immigrants and increasingly intent on deterring Jewish, Russo-Polish, gangsters. It is tempting to think that, as in modern community policing – where the state actively enlists law-enforcement officers from ethnic minorities to assist in combating organized crime – part of the solution to the problem lay in recruiting detectives or policemen capable of penetrating sub-cultures dominated by foreign-language speakers. Nothing could, however, be farther from the truth. Most east Europeans came from societies where Jews were singled out for exclusion from state structures, let alone sensitive areas associated with law-enforcement. Ranks, beyond corporal, were closed to Jews in the tsarist army. It seems reasonable to assume that few Jews would have had the inclination, necessary understanding of unfamiliar judicial systems, or levels of literacy needed to seek out positions in uniformed police forces around the Atlantic. That said, it may also be insufficient to see the absence of Jewish detectives or policemen as deriving solely from cultural, supply-side, problems. Despite the nominal separation of church and state, modernizing

¹⁵ W. H. Worger, *South Africa's city of diamonds: mine workers and monopoly capitalism in Kimberley, 1867–1895* (New Haven, 1987), pp. 135 and 167. On the role of a private detective agency in the development of American capitalism see F. Morn, 'The eye that never sleeps': a history of the Pinkerton national detective agency (Bloomington, 1982).

¹⁶ Van Onselen, 'Prostitutes and proletarians', pp. 109–64; and van Onselen, 'Randlords and rotgut'.

¹⁷ C. van Onselen, *The fox and the flies: Joseph Silver in the Atlantic world, 1868–1918* (forthcoming), ch. 12.

law-enforcement agencies in ostensibly secular states appear to have been largely incapable of rising above the constraints imposed by dominant cultures. Class, ethnic, religious, and other prejudices seem to have prevented the appointment of significant numbers of Jews as full-time detectives or policemen. Whether it be in Argentina, Brazil, the Cape Colony, the United States of America, or the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek, the state and its agencies guarded the right of its own to investigate crime and use force when apprehending 'foreign' criminals and gangsters.

Positive stereotypes of Jews as 'clever', or as belonging to the 'Maccabee or fighting Jewish type', as police commissioner Theodore Roosevelt had it, were insufficient to secure them positions as brainy detectives or brawny policemen in Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Johannesburg, or New York City before the turn of the century.¹⁸ It was as if 'cleverness' in a detective, or 'strength' in a policeman would degenerate into mere cunning or thuggishness if embodied in the shape of plain-clothes or uniformed officers who happened to be Jewish. In short then, as now, hidden ethnic quotas in law-enforcement agencies lay uncomfortably close to the definition of a legitimate state in the eyes of electorate and politicians alike. The cultural analogue of this is equally visible; whereas there are deep historical roots to the portrayal of Jews as stereotypical criminals in classic English literature, the emergence of heroic Jewish detectives or policemen in twentieth-century crime fiction was remarkably slow.¹⁹

While it is difficult to prove conclusively that lack of 'demand' was more significant than 'supply', tantalizing evidence lends credence to the view that, when law-enforcement agencies consciously set out to recruit Jews as plain-clothes or uniformed police, there was no shortage of applicants. Whereas the NYPD employed fewer than 20 Jews in 1880s, the number ballooned to 140 in 1901, after Roosevelt had 'searched out young Jews of exceptional physical promise and encouraged them to join the police department'.²⁰ Likewise, both before and after the South African War, police in the Cape and Transvaal appear to have experienced little difficulty in recruiting Jewish private detectives or 'specials' for particular projects.

By the turn of the twentieth century, then, much of the Atlantic littoral was beset by a troublesome paradox. While many immigrant destinations had increasingly well-entrenched Russo-Polish crime syndicates, law-enforcement

¹⁸ As president of the board of police commissioners in New York City, in 1895, Roosevelt felt the need to recruit more of 'the Macabee or fighting Jewish type' to the police. See J. F. Richardson, *The New York police: colonial times to 1901* (New York, 1970), p. 250; and M. Rischin, *The promised city: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA, 1962), p. 74.

¹⁹ 'Many Jews may have read detective stories from the beginning, but during the so-called Golden Age of the form, roughly from the 1890s to the outbreak of World War II, few Jews wrote detective stories and there were no Jewish detective heroes'; J. L. Yaffe, 'Is this any job for a nice Jewish boy?: (Jews in detective fiction)', in J. L. Breen and M. H. Greenberg, eds., *Synod of sleuths: essays on Judeo-Christian detective fiction* (New York, 1990), pp. 19-55. See also M. J. Turnbull, *Victims or villains: Jewish images in the classic English detective fiction* (Bowling Green, 1998).

²⁰ Rischin, *The promised city*, p. 74.

agencies employed relatively few Jews. The absence of Jewish detectives or policemen left law-enforcement agencies with a difficult choice. Commissioners either had to accept that underlying anti-Semitism in the forces they commanded made for relatively low success rates when dealing with ethnic crime, or they had to find pragmatic, informal, ways of getting Jews to assist in the fight against east European syndicates. In practice, it was hardly a choice – ‘Jewish’ crime was no more acceptable to the state than Jewish police officers. Commissioners were forced to come to terms with more or less reputable private detectives and, beyond that, with a range of unpredictable ‘narks’ or ‘stool pigeons’. The use of socially marginalized Jews to inform on other Jews may have been a novelty in the Atlantic world but, in the old country, it had deep roots.

V

Authoritarian, centralist, states struggling to cope with political and social challenges posed by ethnically distinctive minorities often resort to the use of informers to gain information about or disorganize oppositional elements. From the moment Tsar Nicholas I established the ‘third section’, in 1826, to monitor political conspiracies within the empire, Jewish communities – already subjected to growing discrimination and oppression as Russia modernized – became the object of regulated surveillance by informers. In addition to monitoring those attracted to radical ideologies and terrorist organizations in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the state had an enduring interest in Jews who had escaped from exile, avoided military conscription, or avoided meeting their tax obligations.

Some informers – *moserim* (Hebrew) – operating in the *shtetlekh* and small towns of the western reaches of the empire not only took fees from tsarist officials, but occasionally blackmailed members of their communities thereby doubling their monetary rewards for treachery and became ‘the most hated and despised element in Jewish society’.²¹ Indeed, so deep did hatreds run that unrecorded talmudic law, stretching back to the Middle Ages, sanctioned communal action against informers including capital punishment – most frequently by drowning in the bath house.²² Perhaps the most famous such case revolved around the murder of two informers in the village of Wonkowce, in Podolia, in 1836. That case, in which the famous rabbi Israel of Ruzhin was implicated although acquitted, was not the only instance in which informers had been murdered. In 1873, Peretz Smolenskin offered a further, fictionalized, case in his novel *An ass’s burial* which, presumably, foreshadowed the notorious ‘Donkey’s funeral’ for informers in the new world.²³

²¹ D. Assaf, *The regal way; the life and times of rabbi Israel of Ruzhin* (Stanford, 2002), p. 107.

²² A. Unterman, *Dictionary of Jewish lore & legend* (London, 1991), p. 44.

²³ *Ibid.* Assaf, *Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin*, pp. 104–14.

The invention of dynamite in 1867 and the emergence of terrorist politics in the shape of *Narodnaia volia* – the People’s Will – in 1879 set autocratic Russian politics on a new course which culminated in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881.²⁴ In the wake of the tsar’s murder the new, wide-ranging, internal security law of 1881 ushered in a period where the *okhrana*, the secret police, set up special bureaux in Moscow, St Petersburg and Warsaw. Starting in 1882, amidst an insecure political climate characterized by widespread denunciations, the *okhrana* transformed the role of informers in Russian society to something approaching an instrument of mass surveillance. Its chief, Grigorii Sudeikin, ‘raised the recruitment and deployment of informants to the level of an art’ and, upon his assassination, in 1883, he was succeeded by Sergei Zubatov who proved no less adept at using informants and double-agents.²⁵

‘Jews got a bad name not only for aiding the *okhrana*’, suggests one analyst, ‘but for being revolutionaries as well. They were well represented in both camps.’²⁶ While this was undoubtedly true, it fails to take into account that informing and the use of Jewish informers extended well beyond the political realm. Indeed, of those sent into ‘administrative exile’ under the new security law between 1881 and 1904, no less than 37 per cent were condemned for what was construed as anti-social or ‘reprehensible’ (*porochnoe*) behaviour.²⁷ Tasked with policing political and non-political behaviour, the *okhrana* recruited many of its *agentura* from the lower reaches of society, and ‘the majority of police informants seem to have been Russians and Jews’.²⁸ Predictably, many informers were drawn from anti-social, marginal, elements in the demi-monde of the larger cities. Brothel-owners, landlords of cheap boarding and flop-houses, pimps, and prostitutes were all well represented within the ranks of *okhrana* informants. In St Petersburg, in the mid-1890s, the *okhrana*, assisted by the regular police, kept a watch over 49 hotels, 2,621 drinking establishments, 15 theatres, 16 clubs, 70 houses of prostitution, and 26 flop-houses’; while in Warsaw Jewish pimps became so notorious as police informers that their treachery was woven into the lyrics of popular folk laments.²⁹

Against this background it can be seen how, after the assassination of Alexander II and the passage of new security legislation in 1881, the *okhrana*, in effect, operated urban academies for informers which attracted an entire cohort of anti-social Jewish males born between 1850 and 1860. It was some of these pre-fabricated *agentura*, who graduated in tsarist Russia between 1881 and 1895, who later joined the great migration west and were amongst the first Jewish police informers in the Atlantic world. Those who had not acquired first-hand experience with the *okhrana* appear to have acquired basic skills from peers and many

²⁴ For a brief introduction to the period see R. Pipes, *The Degaev affair; terror and treason in tsarist Russia* (London, 2003), pp. 8–25.

²⁵ J. W. Daly, *Autocracy under siege: security police and opposition in Russia, 1866–1905* (DeKalb, 1998), pp. 32–6, 45, and 72–4. See also R. Deacon, *A history of the Russian secret service* (London, 1972), pp. 86–7.

²⁶ Deacon, *The Russian secret service*, p. 94.

²⁷ Daly, *Autocracy under siege*, p. 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67; Deacon, *The Russian secret service*, p. 93, and n. 65 below.

proved more manipulative than their later police handlers in Buenos Aires, Cape Town, New York, or Rio de Janeiro.

The use of informers in the Atlantic-bound world was as old as urban police forces themselves; there was nothing new or peculiarly 'Jewish' about the practice. In London, the Bow Street Runners, present from the birth of metropolitan policing, were like a corps of paid informers which served the state until it was disbanded in the late 1830s. What *was* perhaps peculiar about the Jewish informers used between 1880 and 1918 was the fact that they were almost as socially distant from the groups they infiltrated as they were from the host cultures of adopted countries. Jewish informers were often marginalized four times over – from *shtetl* or ghetto society back in the Pale of Settlement or Russian-Poland prior to emigration, from the anomic urban cultures of Atlantic cities, from established mainstream religious communities in their adopted countries, and from the criminal sub-cultures they found there. Profoundly alienated, the most notorious informers – no less than some of the detectives and uniformed officers they worked with – suffered from what, in retrospect, appear to have been a range of anti-social personality disorders or mental illnesses.

VI

Joseph Lis, aka Joseph Silver, born in Kielce south of Warsaw in 'Russian-Poland', in 1868, became southern Africa's most notorious gangster and feared police informer over the seven years from 1898 to 1905. The oldest son in a family with a criminal record two, probably three, generations deep, Silver had emigrated in 1885 and, after an initial stay in London, passed through New York City (1889–95), London (1895–8), Johannesburg (1898–9), Kimberley (1900), Cape Town (1900–2), Kimberley (1902), Bloemfontein, Cape Town (1903–5), Swakopmund and Windhoek (1905–7), Paris, Antwerp, Brussels, and Aachen (1908–10), Buenos Aires (1910), Santiago and Valparaiso (1910–13), as well as London, Bergen, New York, and Rio de Janeiro (1914–16) before eventually returning to Poland during the First World War where he was executed as a Russian 'spy' by the Austro-Hungarians on the eastern front in the closing months of 1918.³⁰

The quintessential underworld figure, Silver, provided criminal intelligence to corrupt officers in the NYPD with whom he shared the proceeds of scores of burglaries, confidence tricks, and robberies before falling foul of them in 1893. In 1895, after a spell in Pittsburgh, he returned to New York and, in an unsuccessful attempt to wreak revenge on Charles Jacobs, his former police handler, enlisted as a 'special agent' in the Rev. Charles Parkhurst's 'Society for the Prevention of Crime' (SPC). On his return to London later that year he posed as a 'detective's agent' while engaged in organized prostitution and 'white slave' trafficking before fleeing in 1898. In the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek, elected president of the

³⁰ Van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*.

American club, Silver controlled the Johannesburg morals squad and exercised so much influence in the office of the public prosecutor's that, in late 1898, state attorney, J. C. Smuts, appointed a special force of 'untouchables' under Mostyn Cleaver to break his hold on organized crime.³¹

After the South African War, having enjoyed success in organized crime on the Rand, he switched from gangster-policeman to policeman-gangster, working for inexperienced officers in the Cape and Orange River colonies. In Cape Town, having betrayed a pimp from Odessa in a successful IDB sting, Silver talked his handler, Captain Samuel Lorimer, a fellow neurosyphilis sufferer who died in the local mental hospital in 1913, into getting him appointed as a plain-clothes policeman and was posted to Kimberley at a salary of a £100 sterling per month. Reputedly 'unreliable', Silver lasted three months in the position and then moved to the Orange River Colony where, while running a brothel, he insinuated himself into the role of chief informer in the newly established Bloemfontein CID.³²

A charismatic sexual predator and psychopath, in London, he once stabbed another Polish pimp so severely that he had to bribe the victim to drop the charges and leave the country. At about the same time, 1897, he posed as an eligible bachelor to an immigrant buttonhole-maker in the East End, lured her to a South Bank hotel and kept her prisoner for two weeks while repeatedly assaulting and raping her before sending her out on to the streets as a prostitute. In the Johannesburg Fort, in 1899, in addition to procuring inmates for acts of consensual sex in exchange for cash, he attacked and sodomized an African prisoner. His informing, treachery, and sexual proclivities – which took place at the birth of prison-gang formation in South Africa – earned him a permanent place in the lexicon of the underworld. To this day *impimpi*, the word Africans use to describe an informer – a person whose actions go more to perfidy than sex – remains imbricated in the persona of the bi-sexual Silver. For the same reason the title given to gang members responsible for procuring young African males for sexual purposes in prisons is still *amaSilva*.³³

It is within the context of anti-Semitism, colonialism, and imperialism that one has to understand how the state struggled to free itself of Silver as gangster-policeman and policeman-gangster. In Johannesburg, in 1898, Smuts – tasked with re-shaping the secret service – had to assume special powers and use a newly created force of independent agents supplemented by private detectives to rid the police of Silver's influence. Likewise, in Cape Town, in 1904, Lorimer and the

³¹ C. van Onselen, 'The modernisation of the Kruger state: F. E. T. Krause, J. C. Smuts and the struggle for the control of the Johannesburg public prosecutor's office, 1898–1899', *Law and History Review*, 21 (2003), pp. 483–526.

³² Van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, chs. 10–12.

³³ On *impimpi* – 'a police informer or collaborator' see, for example, P. Silva, *Dictionary of South African English on historical principles* (Oxford, 1996), and on *AmaSilva*, C. van Onselen, 'The regiment of the hills – *umkosi wezintaba*; the Witwatersrand's lumpenproletarian army, 1890–1920', in *New babylon, new nineveh*, pp. 368–97; C. van Onselen, *The small matter of a horse: the life of 'Nongoloza' Mathebula, 1867–1948* (Johannesburg, 1984), pp. 14–15; and van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, ch. 9.

CID, which had earlier set its face against using any outside agency to help fight organized crime, was forced to abandon its position and recruit a Jewish private detective to trap Silver.³⁴ Asked to state his occupation in court Robert Levy, a German, said he was ‘a private detective in the urban police’, an oxymoron that captured the state’s predicament when it came to appointing or recognizing Jews as officers.³⁵

But, even as the Cape Colony with its contingent of Irish and Scottish policemen was trying to divest itself of Silver, the post-bellum British administration in the Transvaal found itself entangled in the same nexus of crime, culture, and class that had ensnared the ante-bellum ZAR administration. When civilian access to the Witwatersrand was restored, in 1901, former American club members responded to the opportunity with alacrity. Russo-Poles exploited the failure of police recruited from demobilized English, Irish, and Scottish troops to liaise with the military in the permit department to establish the ‘immorality trust’ as a crime syndicate.³⁶ So complete and rapid was this re-emergence of ‘organized vice’ on the Rand that, within months, the nominated legislature had to adopt new measures to combat syndicated prostitution. Ordinance 46 of 1903 was yet another of southern Africa’s many morality acts with racial preoccupations that were later to manifest themselves fully in the notorious apartheid-era Immorality Act of 1957.³⁷

In Johannesburg, the post-war morals squad, lacking the institutional memory to deal with Russo-Polish criminals, had to take help where it could find it. One source, who kept them abreast of Silver’s movements when the latter was based in the Orange River Colony, in 1903, was James Hirschberg aka James Lee. Lee, brother of a Bloemfontein pimp, William Hirschberg, was reputedly the agent of the Empire Tea Company, in Johannesburg. A man with a colourful background who spoke several languages and travelled on different passports, Lee had been employed as a spy by the Japanese against tsarist interests in the Far East before the Boxer Rebellion. In reality, Lee – known in underworld circles as ‘Hirsch Japanese’ – was more likely to have been involved in the importation of Japanese prostitutes to service Chinese indentured labourers on the Rand mines.³⁸

³⁴ C. J. Munsen, General Manager, Long & Co., Private Detective and Enquiry Agents to Attorney General, 15 Mar. 1904, Cape Town, Cape Archive Depot (CAD), Attorney General (AG), vol. 1442, part 1. How the negative image of the private detective changed during the course of twentieth-century American history can be gauged from Morn, ‘*The eye that never sleeps*’, pp. 68–90.

³⁵ Evidence of R. Levy, *Rex vs Joe Silver* 1904, Cape Town, CAD, AG, vol. 1531/12984.

³⁶ Van Onselen, ‘Prostitutes and proletarians’, pp. 146–56. Some idea of the problems posed by bribery and corruption in the Johannesburg morals squad in the post-bellum period is to be found in minutes of evidence, enquiry before Mr H. O. Buckle (first civil magistrate) into the relations existing between superintendent W. C. Smallman and Lloyd, T. T. P, evidence led on Sat., 6 Apr. 1907, p. 15, Pretoria, SANA, Local Division (LD), vol. 1421/2, AG 1111/07.

³⁷ South Africa, Immorality Act 23 of 1957.

³⁸ Lee, whose informing earned him a sand-bagging from Silver in Bloemfontein, in 1903, presumably received formal or informal training at the hands of the *okhrana* and his role as spy is outlined in van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, ch. 13.

But the morals squad's principal post-war informant was Leon Rosenblatt, born in 1866, a classic low-life psychopath and *okhrana* collaborator whose primary experience was acquired in Warsaw amidst the swirling fears and suspicion that Joseph Conrad was so successful at evoking. In 1905, Rosenblatt's early career and subsequent move into the Atlantic world was recorded by a few unknown underworld rivals:

[Rosenblatt] was brought up as a pilferer and developed into a robber of the most notorious type. [In Poland] he occupied himself with arson and incendiary, causing many innocent people to be broiled or burned alive. Later on he became acquainted with the Russian police (as he is now with the Johannesburg police), he was anxious to show his faithful service, he used to make false traps ruining many people in this way.

Maliciously, he used to conceal false papers with people, describing them as nihilists and rebels against the Czar, and without a trial, these unfortunate beings were tortured and afterwards banished to Siberia.

After a time, the police found out his disdainful plottings and felonies. Rosenblatt observed his doings were of no advantage to him, and as he was no more regarded as a faithful police servant, he left Russia for Brazil [in about 1885]. There together with a few other fellows he poisoned a rich lady with the intent to rob her. He afterwards escaped to Buenos Aires, where he carried on a business of the most immoral type.³⁹

Howard Scott's wry adage that 'a criminal is a person with predatory instincts who has not sufficient capital to form a corporation' could be applied partly to Rosenblatt and Silver. Both were psychopaths, well in line with the behavioural patterns first identified by Hervey Cleckley in the 1950s and, like several of his patients, had entrepreneurial skills which they deployed with some success in small businesses when possessed of the necessary capital.⁴⁰ When lacking funds, however, they acted more like impecunious hawkers; mere *smousers* who, lacking material resources, peddled authentic and/or manufactured information.

Informers traded in imperfect markets dominated by single buyers where they, and corrupt or careerist officials, were locked into relationships that were inherently unstable. In tsarist Russia, *okhrana* informers seldom occupied their positions for longer than three years.⁴¹ In the Cape, Silver, and in the Transvaal, Rosenblatt also managed little more than thirty-six months before post-bellum law-enforcement scandals saw the unexpected closure of morals squads, wholesale CID dismissals, or police corruption trials. By 1907, Rosenblatt, having

³⁹ Anonymous, *Dreyfus cases in Johannesburg: calumniator morally masked or the scandal of Johannesburg* (n.d. c. 1904/5), p. 2, Johannesburg Public Library, Strange Collection. If these allegations were true – as seems likely – then Rosenblatt would have been working for the *okhrana*, in Warsaw, in the period immediately after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. The background and increase in the numbers of agents-provocateur and informers during that period is sketched in P. Kropotkin, *The terror in Russia* (4th edn, London 1909), ch. 2, part 2. The most extensive account, however, is in Daly, *Autocracy under siege*.

⁴⁰ H. Cleckley, *The mask of sanity: an attempt to clarify some issues about the so-called psychopathic personality* (St Louis, 1950). For a discussion of more recent psychiatric literature, as applied to Joseph Silver, see van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, ch. 25.

⁴¹ Daly, *Autocracy under siege*, p. 94.

outlived his usefulness and defrauded J. W. Jagger & Co., was serving two prison sentences.⁴²

In one respect, however, Rosenblatt's career was more interesting than that of the apolitical Silver. In Russian-Poland, where anarchism gave birth to urban terror, the tsarist regime came down hard on Jewish dissidents. When authoritarian regimes deem political challenges to be merely criminal – as happened in apartheid-era South Africa – it is not long before criminal acts assume 'political' dimensions, thereby confusing otherwise clear-cut distinctions. Rosenblatt had no difficulty in making the transition from the criminal to the political – a characteristic also evident in the career of another informer.

Chil 'Top' Steiman, a contemporary of Silver's born c. 1872, was a Russo-Polish pimp with strong underworld ties to Odessa who emigrated to the Argentine in the late 1880s or early 1890s. Found guilty of serious assault in Buenos Aires, in 1897, Steiman was predisposed to assaulting and humiliating women ensnared into organized prostitution and international 'white slave' traffick. In 1905, he was a signatory to the founding document of the Warsaw burial society, precursor to the *zwi migdal* in which he served as 'auctioneer', accepting bids for prostitutes from brothel-owners assembled in a flesh market convened in the Alcazar theatre. In his own enterprise, at 1987 Lavalle Street, Steiman insisted on being addressed as 'master' by women in the trade. Prostitutes seeking favours had to approach him on all fours and lick his boots if they were not to receive a beating with his trade-mark cane. A psychopath with well-developed culturally determined business instincts, Steiman compiled and marketed a guide to Buenos Aires brothels and night life before he and Silver became business partners.⁴³

Like Russo-Polish counterparts in Cape Town who feared deportation during the anti-alien panic that took root in the colony after the South African War, Steiman was acutely sensitive to the issue of citizenship.⁴⁴ Accustomed to corrupting police of Italian or Spanish descent, he became alarmed when, in 1902, parliament passed a residence law to combat crime and political unrest. He

⁴² The Cape Town police trials can be traced in Cape Supreme Court Records, July–Aug. 1904, case no. 38, *Rex vs Osberg* and Sept.–Oct. 1904, and case no. 33 Cape Town, CAD, and those in Johannesburg, in vol. 1421/2, AG 1111/07, enquiry before Mr H. O. Buckle into the relations between Smallman and Lloyd, evidence led on Sat. 6 Apr. 1907, p. 15, Pretoria, SANA. Part of Rosenblatt's criminal career in Johannesburg can be traced in L. Rosenblatt to the attorney general, 8 May 1906, LD, vol. 1266, AG 2171/06, Witwatersrand High Court Applications, vol. 5/102, ref. 492–520, opposed application, 10 Oct. 1907, and Gov. vol. 1171, ref. PS 81/75/98, No. 81/92/1908, Pretoria, SANA.

⁴³ Van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, chs. 20–2. For the broader, ethnic, context of legitimate east European enterprise in the Atlantic world see, for example, A. Godley, *Jewish immigrant entrepreneurship in New York and London, 1880–1914* (Basingstoke, 2001).

⁴⁴ The significance of this important moment at the end of the South African War is often underestimated, or overlooked. See M. Shain, 'Diamonds, pogroms and undesirables – anti-alienism and legislation in the Cape Colony, 1890–1906', *South African Historical Journal*, 12 (Nov. 1980), pp. 13–28, as corrective.

became a naturalized Argentinian, rendering him eligible for national service. A patriotic gangster decades before it became fashionable amongst the mafia in America, Steiman, like many a cheap, corrupt, nationalist politician, delighted in defrauding, denouncing, or just stealing from his countrymen. His acquisition of citizenship came at an important juncture in Argentine history.

By 1910, with the exception of a short depression in the 1890s, Argentina's small commercial and landed elite had experienced continuous economic growth for three decades. A steady inflow of immigrants, including 20,000 Russo-Poles in the decade leading up to the First World War, underwrote impressive growth rates and Buenos Aires came to dominate the nation's economic, political, and social life in a way that was without parallel in the Atlantic world. Inflation, however, saw wages lag and, after the turn of the century, each year saw a growing number of strikes as anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, bundists, and socialists sought to defend working-class interests. Violent disturbances and growing police repression formed the backdrop to the assassination, in 1909, of the commissioner of police, Ramon Falcon, by a young Jewish anarchist, Simon Radvisky. Lacking institutional capacity to penetrate immigrant circles in which revolutionary ideas flourished, the police turned to the underworld for informers.⁴⁵

It was a situation tailor-made for Steiman who may have been informing on radical compatriots even before Falcon's assassination. Shortly before the murder, Radvisky complained about 'spies' frequenting the Russian library located only doors away from Steiman's brothel in Lavalle. In the wake of the assassination Steiman and scores of Russo-Polish pimps linked to the *zwi migdal* were detained for questioning. It was after this spell in detention that Steiman, by his own admission, started paying protection not only in cash, but by providing the police with political intelligence about Russo-Polish anarchists and Jewish radicals.

But it was difficult to work on both the criminal and political fronts and Steiman had difficulty in keeping up payments, let alone providing detectives with meaningful information about radicalized Russo-Poles. By mid-1910, when he first met Silver – then newly arrived from Europe where he had been involved in a series of impressive robberies organized by Polish compatriots – Steiman was so far behind with payments that he was considering leaving the country. Neither he, nor Silver, who had trouble coming to terms with those in the *zwi migdal* who he had previously informed on in other Atlantic cities, had sufficient space within which to operate comfortably. In the end the two, one a contemporary political 'spy' and the other a former police informer, struck a deal with the *zwi migdal* and left Buenos Aires. Crossing the Andes they descended upon Chile where, for some years, in association with the *zwi migdal*, they ran brothels in Santiago and Valparaiso. Steiman, building on earlier experiences, for some months provided

⁴⁵ See V. A. Mirelman, 'The Jews in Argentina, 1890–1930: assimilation and particularism' (D.Phil., University of Columbia, 1973), an indispensable guide to Buenos Aires's Jewish history.

the Santiago police with information on Russo-Polish anarchists and syndicalists in Chile. Silver, even more treacherous, provided the CID with intelligence about both Steiman, pimps in Valparaiso, and their links to the *zwei migdal*.⁴⁶

VII

Although reluctant to recruit Jews in significant numbers law-enforcement agencies seldom hesitated to use marginals with disturbed personalities in covert operations against Russo-Polish syndicates. Occasionally, culturally camouflaged informers helped achieve significant results. In pre-war Johannesburg, information provided to Mostyn Cleaver's 'untouchables' by three disaffected pimps – David Krakower, Henry Rosenchild, and Morris Rosenberg – was crucial to unravelling the secret, inner, workings of the American club which was being run by an invisible, second, executive controlled by Silver. In Cape Town, betrayed by former associates, in 1904, Silver and his business partner, Solomon Goldstein, were equally quick to inform on Max Harris who dominated post-war organized crime in Cape Town's District Six. Harris's conviction, in turn, led to the corruption trials of officers Charteris and Osberg.⁴⁷

In retrospect, however, opportunistic, piece-meal, interventions by state agencies did less to dislodge the hold of organized Russo-Polish crime before the First World War than did the underlying forces that had informed the emergence of the ethnic underworld in the first place. It was only once the demographic and gender imbalances of in-migration had abated during the interwar period, and major cities and ports around the Atlantic had assumed better-balanced social profiles, that returns from alcohol, gambling, and prostitution lost their appeal for poor Russo-Poles.

Cape Town, a commercial backwater, was merely the venue for a seaside sabbatical by up-country gangsters during the South African War. As soon as the war was over many Russo-Poles, including former American club members, returned to the male-dominated immigrant and migrant labour centres of the north where they remained a feature of the Witwatersrand underworld for another decade. Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, and New York City, too, all retained their attraction for Russo-Polish gangsters until the 1930s.⁴⁸ In the long term it was the persistence of underlying socio-economic conditions that sustained organized 'vice' in these cities but, in the short term, it was the shortcomings of police handlers that stretched the working lives of informers and prolonged the life of syndicated crime.

In New York City, most unusually, Silver's police handler was a native-born American Jew of German extraction, detective Charles Jacobs. Between 1889 and

⁴⁶ Van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, ch. 22.

⁴⁷ See R. Hallett, 'Policemen, pimps and prostitutes – public morality and police corruption, Cape Town, 1902–1904', paper presented to the History Workshop Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, 3–7 Feb. 1978.

⁴⁸ Secondary literature covering the relevant Atlantic cities as cited in n. 3, above.

1893, Jacobs and his side-kick, detective Charles McManus, benefited materially from Silver's burglary, extortion, robbery, pick-pocketing, and pimping on the Lower East Side.⁴⁹ In 1893, with an economic downturn fuelling working-class unrest and a change in city government imminent, Jacobs was redeployed to political work. This shift in focus increased the distance between him and Silver. Jacobs was drawn to vectors of working-class radicalism and, on one occasion attempted, unsuccessfully, to turn Emma Goldman, the leading female anarchist of the day, into an informer by underscoring their common, Jewish, origins.⁵⁰ By mid-1893, Jacobs, at least as treacherous if not as violent as his former criminal collaborator and informer, had succeeded in 'persuading' Silver to flee New York.⁵¹ Jacobs's betrayal rankled and, confined to Pittsburgh's Riverside Prison, Silver spent 1894 monitoring the fortunes of the NYPD. Sensing Jacobs's and McManus's growing vulnerability to counter-attack from reform-minded civic agencies, he plotted his revenge.

In 1895, posing as the reformed dupe of Jewish criminals but by then bent on exposing corruption in the NYPD, Silver persuaded the society for the prevention of crime to employ him as a 'special agent'/'private detective'. The ensuing six months saw a titanic political contest, ostensibly between the SPC and the NYPD, recorded on the front pages of the *New York Times*. In reality it was, almost literally, a fight to the death between Silver and Jacobs – replete with attempts at bribery, entrapment, unauthorized changes to official records, disappearance of witnesses, false charges, planted evidence, secret meetings, unscheduled court appearances, and deliberations by bewildered grand juries. In the short run the battle was inconclusive since the senior protagonists within the SPC and NYPD eventually realized that they were ensnared in a vendetta. In the long run, however, the contest shortened Jacobs's career and did further damage to the NYPD's reputation.⁵²

Having been tested in the most demanding forum, Silver, a master manipulator, went on to do battle with police handlers in Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Johannesburg, Kimberley, Santiago, and Valparaiso. On the basis of his record there, it seems reasonable to suggest that Silver demonstrated the ability to insinuate himself into the lives of his handlers with consequences that were often deleterious for the detectives concerned, and the reputation of the CID. Given off-the-record transactions between Silver and his handlers, it is impossible to know the contents of their privileged exchanges. That noted, however, it would

⁴⁹ See Moss, *The American metropolis*, pp. 157–61 and 215–20, in which Joseph Silver appears as the un-named 'reformed' ex-convict, 'J. S'. Also van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, ch. 6.

⁵⁰ Jacobs's unsuccessful attempt at 'turning' Goldman is recorded in her *Living my life* (New York, 1931), pp. 124–7. I would like to thank Dan Czitrom for drawing this reference to my attention. On Jacobs's and Silver's interaction during this period see van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, chs. 4 and 5.

⁵¹ D. J. Czitrom, 'Our police protectors: authority and corruption in turn of the century New York', unpublished paper presented to the organization of American historians, Chicago, 29 Mar. 1996.

⁵² See *Rex vs Joe Silver* 1904, evidence of S. Lorimer, AG, vol. 1531/12984, Cape Town, CAD.

appear that in several cases Silver acquired personal information about handlers which, in effect, enabled him to blackmail officers who thought they could use him to further their own careers.⁵³

In Cape Town, Silver, brothel-keeper and pimp, exercised an extraordinary hold over Samuel Lorimer for half a decade. How, where, and when Lorimer acquired syphilis is unknown but it is worth speculating that Silver encouraged and facilitated his handler's sexual indiscretions. It would help account for how he bullied Lorimer into obtaining him a position as an IDB plain-clothes policeman. Silver never relaxed his grip on his handler. In 1904, when Silver's notoriety was well established and the Cape in the midst of an anti-alien panic, he persuaded Lorimer and several CID officers to endorse, and then to process, an application for naturalization. When Lorimer later feigned a lack of knowledge about his informer's background in a court case, he was humiliated by having to admit that it was *he* who had obtained Silver a position in the police.⁵⁴

Rosenblatt and Steiman, too, caused considerable embarrassment to the police and CID. Manifesting the fearlessness and emotional insensitivity that characterizes psychopaths, they were allowed to engage in highly profitable criminal activities in exchange for being informers. Professional betrayers immune to prosecution for blatantly criminal activities, they were expected to maintain low profiles and behave discreetly. But, given their underlying mental condition, this was often difficult to achieve. In Johannesburg, the querulous Rosenblatt drew attention to himself by boarding moving trains and, when fined for these infractions, demonstrated *chutzpah* by complaining directly to the attorney general.⁵⁵ More alarmingly, his poorly concealed intention to defraud Jagger & Co. was an open secret. In Valparaiso, too, Steiman was so certain of police protection that he had official, printed, invitations sent to senior officers when he opened a new hotel-brothel.⁵⁶

VIII

The state's reliance on informers to penetrate Russo-Polish syndicates appears to have had little impact on the extent of moral offences rooted in male-dominated, immigrant cultures around the Atlantic before the First World War. The most it did was to produce occasional, sensational, trials revealing the extent to which detectives and uniformed officers were prone to corruption by gangsters of east European origin. The relationship between shady police handlers and suspect informants was, as already noted, fraught and characterized by betrayal. Viewed from a wider perspective the state's psychopaths were merchants of treachery,

⁵³ This was, of course, a classic, generic, problem in dealing with informers. See, for example, Daly, *Autocracy under siege*, p. 93.

⁵⁴ Van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, ch. 22.

⁵⁵ L. Rosenblatt to the attorney general, 8 May 1906, Pretoria, SANA, WLD, vol. 1266, AG, 2171/06.

⁵⁶ Anon., *The scandal of Johannesburg*, pp. 1-6. Rabinowitz's earlier dealings with Silver, in Kimberley, in 1900, are recounted in van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, ch. 10.

hawkers of information, profiting from favourable trading conditions in an era of mass migration characterized by an absence of passports, the rise of trans-oceanic telegraphic communication, and falling rail and steamship fares.

Like all business, the trade had structural and temporal peculiarities. In order to maintain credibility, informers had to pass information to agencies of sufficient quality to ensure successful conversion into prosecutions. Court cases, however, produced problematic outcomes. Public hearings laid bare the circuits and sources of the authorities' criminal intelligence which blew informants' cover, limiting future effectiveness and exposing them to the occupational hazards of reprisal. In short, informers operated in a hemispheric robber-economy, and successful prosecutions prompted the need to move on to new terrain in order to repeat the endless cycle of personal and institutional betrayal. It is against this background that one has to view the extraordinary mobility of men like Silver, Steiman, and Rosenblatt.

Ethnically lubricated underworld linkages between Brussels, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, London, Paris, New York City, Johannesburg, and Rio de Janeiro in the late nineteenth century were extensive, and persisted into the 1920s. It is an epic that awaits its historian. One dimension of the tale that needs to be noted, however, is the way in which criminals, exploiting advances in communication and transport in the era before Interpol, often had more information about underworld adversaries than did metropolitan police forces. Incredible as it seems, Silver and Rosenblatt could be reasonably confident that there was either no or few exchanges about their proclivities or criminal records between CIDs in Bloemfontein, Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Kimberley, let alone between detectives in other Atlantic countries. Indeed, in some ways they had more to fear from counter-intelligence initiatives launched by Russo-Polish rivals than the state. Unsolicited public denunciations – one of the ways in which underworld elements struck back at state informers – bears the hallmark of *okhrana* experiences in the tsarist empire in the turbulent period that followed on the assassination of Alexander II.⁵⁷

In an attempt to contain ethnic, nationalist and working-class aspirations while simultaneously reforming autocratic structures, the tsarist administration – like that of the dying South African apartheid regime in the twentieth century – deemed political opposition to be criminal, and banished its critics. In all such regimes, however, the blurring of the two categories returns to haunt the state as anti-social elements, having mastered the rules of the semantic game, cast criminal actions as political. In Russian-Poland, criminals, who had seen anti-tsarist organizations in which Jews were well-represented use the printed word to good effect, learnt the lesson, and took it with them into the Atlantic world.

In late 1904, in the wake of extensive press coverage of police corruption in Cape Town occasioned by the Russo-Polish syndicate headed by Max Harris, an extraordinary pamphlet surfaced in the Transvaal. *Dreyfus cases in*

⁵⁷ Daly, *Autocracy under siege*, pp. 61–2.

Johannesburg: calumniator morally masked, or the scandal of Johannesburg ran to sixteen printed pages. Attractively, albeit hastily set, it purported to be the work of four British patriots. Everything within it, however, pointed to it having been written by disaffected Russo-Polish pimps who were being denied official favours by Rosenblatt's handler, superintendent W. C. Smallman, the head of the morals squad. In addition to offering an account of Rosenblatt's career as informer and forecasting the turn his dealings with Jagger & Co. would take, the pamphlet drew attention to the burglarous, counterfeiting, illicit diamond dealing, pimping, and 'white slaving' propensities of Rosenblatt and three of his Russo-Polish associates. It also outlined plausible fault-lines linking corrupt police practices to the public prosecutor's office and one of the magistrate's courts.⁵⁸

In the same way, one day in 1912, every private postbox in the central post office on the *Plaza des Armas*, in Santiago, contained a letter outlining Silver's career in international crime and a copy of an incriminating letter written by him to his gangster step-brother, Jack.⁵⁹ Both the Rosenblatt and Silver pamphlets exposed dangerous men with long criminal records, highlighting how they had insinuated themselves into the police. What is not clear from the record, however, is how this unwanted publicity was dealt with by law-enforcement agencies, police handlers, or the informers themselves. There appears to have been no public response, no press reports or confidential follow-up in official circles. Silver and Rosenblatt simply continued their work as informers.

Anonymously authored pamphlets were hardly the most serious obstacles that the state's informers and their police partners in licensed crime had to overcome. Ostracized by law-abiding Jews and kept at arms length by leading gangsters in syndicated crime, troubled loners lived with the ever-present danger of assault, or worse. In Cape Town, Solomon Goldstein, ex-Argentine brothel-keeper, business partner of Silver's, and a police informer with a taste for Latin *nom de plumes*, told a court that 'I was nearly killed', by gangsters he was unwilling to name, but who answered to the Charteris-Harris syndicate which he and his wife had run foul of.⁶⁰ On the eve of his betrayal by his handler, Lorimer, Silver asked that he not be given 'up to the fury of an angry mob that would like to see me burned at the stake'.⁶¹

Silver carried a knife throughout his youth and severely stabbed a gangster rival, in London, in 1898. When his reactions slowed, he carried a revolver which

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Statement made before the judges of the third criminal court by E. J. Castro, CID, Santiago Police, 16 Dec. 1912, C.C.3/San./1912 (uncatalogued collection) Chile, Santiago, National Archives. See also A. G. Escobedo, *La prostitucion en Santiago, 1813-1931* (Santiago, 1994), pp. 118-23.

⁶⁰ Hallett, 'Policemen, pimps and prostitutes', p. 8, and van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, ch. 14.

⁶¹ *Rex vs Joe Silver* 1904, J. Silver to Hon. (sic) Captain Lorimer, 18 Aug. 1904, Cape Town, CAD, AG, vol. 1531/12984. Unusually, the court exhibit was typewritten and not in Silver's distinctive, original, hand. The sentiments seem like Silver's but, given his hold on his police handler it is possible that the original letter was abridged and edited by Lorimer prior to being typed for presentation in court. Silver, pathologically argumentative, did not dispute authorship.

he used during a botched burglary in a jewellery store in Bloemfontein, in 1902; a heist designed to advance his police mentor's career and imprison an underworld opponent. Years later, having created enemies enough to last a life-time, he lived in something approaching genuine fear of the *zvi migdal* while in Chile. In 1913, he told his new handler, in Valparaiso, a semi-fictional cautionary tale:

Not long ago two *caftans* [i.e. Jewish] brothers who had betrayed their fraternity back in South Africa arrived in Buenos Aires. Those betrayed had sent word ahead to Buenos Aires and, on the day of their arrival in the Argentine capital, the brothers were found drowned in the working class quarter of La Boca; both had had their arms broken. The avengers had taken them to a remote part of the working class *faubourg* and, after breaking their arms to ensure that they were unable to save themselves by swimming, had thrown them into the river where the brothers had met a horrifying death.⁶²

This story, an informer's nightmare, illustrates how neurosyphilis fed into Silver's underlying paranoia, but it did more than that. It reflected how, well into the 1870s, Jewish communities in the tsarist empire dealt with traitors. As one historian of the north-western Russian provinces has noted, 'Were the Dnieper able to speak, it could tell of many informers who were drowned in its waters.'⁶³

Meyer Hasenfus, a post-bellum Johannesburg informer hailing from Warsaw, and supposedly a kinsman of Rosenblatt's, made a fatal miscalculation when his professional obligations became personalized and caused an underworld family feud. Hasenfus's hatred of James 'Ginger' London, a rival gambler and pimp from the East End of London, pre-dated his own career as informer. In 1903, London gave evidence for the prosecution in a case which led to Hasenfus being sentenced to a lengthy spell of imprisonment and ten lashes. Upon his release, Hasenfus, not content with informing on London, 'interfered' with his Ukrainian prostitute-wife, Sophie Stein. Matters came to a head on a winter's evening, in 1907, when London stabbed Hasenfus to death outside a Kerk Street restaurant.⁶⁴ The murder prompted the police to dispense with Rosenblatt's services who, then vulnerable, was prosecuted and sentenced to a year in prison for running a brothel on the basis of evidence provided by Sophie Stein. Rosenblatt then attempted to return the favour by using his former police handlers to get Stein implicated as an accomplice, after the fact, in the murder of Hasenfus.⁶⁵ In general, however, Russo-Polish gangland slayings were rare and it is significant that London was found guilty of culpable homicide rather than murder. Incarceration remained the primary fear of most Jewish gangsters.

⁶² *Police Review*, Valparaiso, Mar. 1913, year VII, pp. 28–32, for the wider context. The earliest, verifiable, stages of this tale can be traced in the Buenos Aires press. See *El Día*, *La Prensa*, and *Tribuna* of 8 and 18 Dec. 1912 (I am indebted to Gabriela Braccio for these references). See also, van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, ch. 22.

⁶³ As quoted in Assaf, *Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin*, p. 105.

⁶⁴ *Rex vs James London, Neil McMahon, Henry Diamond, and Sophie Steyn* (sic), June 1908, Pretoria, SANA, WLD, 159/08.

⁶⁵ This case is the subject of on-going research tentatively entitled 'Death in the diaspora, the murder of Meyer Hasenfus: Johannesburg's Russo-Polish Underworld, 1895–1910'.

For informers the real or imagined terrors of the mind were often easier to deal with than confinement of the body. Silver, Steiman, and Rosenblatt, who shared a fear of being locked up, all underwent lengthy periods of imprisonment for crimes against people including brothel-keeping, corrupting the morals of the under-aged and pimping, or for crimes against property including burglary and theft. Indeed, in the case of Silver, where the psychopathy was most advanced, one in three of his adult years were spent behind bars. Most of his crimes, often committed with the active or passive endorsement of policemen, were of a predictable type. What is revealing of the informers' true calling, however, is the nature of the *other* crimes they were prosecuted for – contempt of court, defeating the ends of justice, and perjury.⁶⁶

In Warsaw, even before the great migration, prostitutes sang a lament;

Oh the pimps
They are spies
Provocateurs they are
They go to workers' meetings
And listen to speeches
Then they go tell it to the police.⁶⁷

Not surprisingly, many hawkers of information took their trade with them when they set out for the new world where some met an ignominious end. As one historian of America has noted, the burial of a notable in a respectable community could be the occasion for ostentatious displays but

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.⁶⁸

Smolenskin's *Ass's burial*, too, lived on the minds of Jews in the Atlantic world.

IX

Many histories of law-enforcement agencies in the western world, for reasons that are easy to understand, paint predictable bureaucratic and institutional trajectories charting the origins, development, staffing, and organization of police forces.⁶⁹ While the best studies provide us with clear accounts of the evolution of law-enforcement agencies, they often fail to provide us with something more elusive – a history of policing. While a history of the police force concentrates on structure, a history of policing takes one on to the terrain of process.

⁶⁶ Van Onselen, *The fox and the flies*, passim.

⁶⁷ Bristow, *Prostitution and prejudice*, p. 59, see also p. 31.

⁶⁸ Goren, *Saints and sinners*, p. 13.

⁶⁹ In the case of South Africa – as good an example of a 'police state' as any during the apartheid-era – we lack a convincing historical account of the institutional dimensions of the police, let alone a study of attendant economic, social, and political processes.

Studies of policing need to be grounded in an understanding of the social realities that underpin the shifting sands of state-formation and society. Changing patterns of cultural dominance, the evolving prejudices of majorities, fluctuations in gender ratios, transitional demographic profiles, alternating sources of immigrant flows, shifts in labour markets and their capacity to absorb natives and newcomers, the coalescing and separating of crimes against people and property, competing urban myths, and manipulated visions of national identity all need to inform professional accounts of the assembly and actions of law-enforcement agencies. The same considerations should, presumably, underpin reviews of policing in democratic societies.

It is within this broader, more dynamic, setting that the problem of organized ethnic crime in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has to be revisited. Just as our understanding of the emergence of the mafia in the United States is enhanced by a greater appreciation of the historical economic and social forces that forged the *mezzogiorno* and modern Sicily, so we need to go back and systematically expose the underlying structural forces that shaped tsarist Russia. It is only once we have plotted the progressive marginalization and evolving patterns of criminality amongst an oppressed east European Jewry in the Pale of Settlement and Russian-Poland that we will be able to develop a rounded picture of the ethnic dimension that organized crime assumed in the cities of the Atlantic world.

Similarly, it is only once the plight of poor and vulnerable Jews has been more fully documented – in central and eastern Europe prior to emigration and in new settings round the Atlantic as immigrants – that the reluctance of law-enforcement agencies to employ Jews as detectives or policemen will become clearer. The accomplishment of that task will also facilitate our analysis of the emergence and persistence of organizations such as the American club, the Max Hochstim association, the New York independent benevolent society, and *zvi migdal*. Once *all* those inter-locking dynamics have been exposed we will appreciate why it is that, in order to penetrate the redoubts of organized Jewish crime, the state and its agencies had to use the services of anti-social, alienated, marginalized, secular Jews as informers. Newly established CIDs did not consciously recruit psychopaths – indeed the concept itself dates only to the mid-twentieth century. But, in an age when the absence of forensic, scientific, evidence left courts reliant on personal testimony for purposes of identification, informers played a crucial role in infiltrating the structures of the ‘other’ so as to ensure successful prosecutions. Once informants had outlived their usefulness they were betrayed either by state officials with questionable ethics, or through the employment of that sociological rarity, the Jewish private detective.

It is too early to draw definitive, overarching, conclusions in these matters but it seems that the more authoritarian, culturally homogeneous, and nationalist the state in outlook, the less likely it was to use ethnic outsiders to gather criminal intelligence relating to organized crime. The ways in which law-enforcement agencies used psychopaths to assist in policing organized crime prior to the First

World War, and the use to which similar traits in spies like Trebitsch Lincoln and Salomon Rosenblum aka Sidney Reilly were harnessed during the First World War demand careful investigation by historians.⁷⁰ Nationalism, the state, and the ethics and prejudices of law-enforcement agencies when employing officers and informers are topics of transcendental importance which cannot be left to those who are merely interested in charting institutional parameters of police forces. It is awful secrets of the past, including the use of psychopaths, that may help unlock the far more complex, problematic, histories of policing.

⁷⁰ The case of east European and Russo-Polish spies in the First World War, once again nominal, secular, Jews who manifested deeply anti-social, if not outrightly psychopathic, behaviour is the subject of on-going research.