

Historical Note

The story of Sid, his family and his friends is made up, but it is set in places and events that were all too real. The year 1933 was the dark heart of the Great Depression. Farms and businesses failed. Factories closed. At least thirty workers in every hundred were jobless. There was no government “social safety net” to protect anyone. Many families endured poverty, eviction and breadlines. Homeless men “rode the rails” on freight trains, looking for work and sometimes begging.

In Germany, Adolf Hitler led his Nazi Party to victory in elections, unleashing a reign of terror on Jews and other groups. Canada was little more welcoming — unless immigrants were white, British and Protestant. The Canadian government’s policy toward accepting others was later said to be “none is too many,” even while newspapers carried reports from Germany about Nazi persecution.

Toronto, a much smaller city then, was not much better. Minorities were kept out of professions, neighbourhoods and even stores and vacation spots. Non-British people — mostly Jewish, with some Italians and a very few Black and Chinese families — clustered in the Ward, a poor downtown neighbourhood, and the Kensington area, just west. Those with jobs worked for low wages, mostly in garment factories, construction and manual labour. Those calling for unions and workers’ rights were watched by the police. Chief Dennis Draper imagined violent revolutionaries behind every lamppost.

In the steamy summer of 1933, people from the Ward and Kensington went to beaches in the east end of the city for relief. There, residents fearful of “foreigners” organized neighbourhood patrols to keep them out. They called themselves swastika clubs and openly wore the symbol already made infamous by the Nazis. Trouble brewed in the heat. Confrontations followed, both there and in Willowvale Park, also known as Christie Pits, northwest of Kensington, where the notorious Pit Gang were just as dangerous to anyone they saw as an outsider.

Despite pleas for calm and denunciations of the swastika clubs by Mayor William Stewart, a riot erupted at a baseball diamond in Christie Pits on the evening of August 16, 1933, when a homemade swastika banner was unfurled during a softball game between the St. Peter's Church and Harbord Playground teams. The Harbord players were mostly Jewish. Word spread quickly beyond the park. Young men from Kensington and the Ward raced to the scene with whatever they could lay their hands on, to fight the Pit Gang.

The rioting lasted four hours. Many suspected the police were deliberately slow to respond because Chief Draper hoped the Jews and Italians would get a beating. The opposite happened instead.

The city was outraged. Mayor Stewart tried to have Draper fired, but the chief had too many powerful friends. Stewart did succeed in reaching out to the Jewish community, and in banning the swastika: anybody wearing one would be arrested.

The riot at Christie Pits became an early and potent symbol of immigrant pride and solidarity as the storm clouds of World War II slowly gathered. Nonetheless, it did not end the tradition of quiet bigotry against Jews and others in Canada.

Today, many things are different. The Nazis were defeated in World War II. Social services can help those who need them. Toronto has become an exciting and diverse major city, home to people from all around the world.

Still, when times are troubled, there can be a longing for simple answers to complicated problems. Often the easiest thing for some to do is blame anyone who seems "different": those who speak differently, worship differently, look or dress differently.

Sound familiar? The past of 1933 may be long ago and far away, but some of its darkness lurks with us still. That's why we made this book.