

He Was Good to His Mother

The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America

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Like every good Jewish boy, Abe Reles would go to his mother's house every Friday evening for a traditional Sabbath dinner of gefilte fish, chicken soup with noodles and boiled chicken. One night he arrived for dinner with his best pal Martin Goldstein and a guy named Johnny who thought he was going to have a pleasant evening and a free meal. However, Reles and Goldstein had other plans. Several weeks before, Reles had accepted a contract to kill Johnny and Goldstein was more than happy to help. After dinner, Reles sent his mother to the movies and after she left, he and Goldstein proceeded to batter Johnny to death, chop up his body in the bathtub and put it into bags. Goldstein then took the bags away to burn them while Reles cleaned up the bathroom. By the time Mrs Reles had returned, her loving son was waiting for her to have tea and a piece of honey cake.

Where did Reles and his murderous associates come from? Between 1870 and 1925 nearly two million Eastern European Jews emigrated to the United States. Almost half of these immigrants ended up in New York ghettos, living in squalid tenements and abject poverty. Some worked in the sweatshops servicing the textile industry while others made a living as market traders in the noisy streets. Many hard working people were eventually able to rise out of the seamy slums to more respectable neighbourhoods and live the 'American Dream' – even some of America's leading Jewish entertainers emerged from the New York ghettos. Others took a more dubious route to fame and fortune.

One of New York's largest Jewish ghettos, the Lower East Side, spawned a rich and complex culture of criminality and vice. Reles was born there on 10 May 1906 to Sam Reles and Rose Schulman who were Jewish immigrants from Austria. The family was forced to live in a filthy tenement until the opening of the Williamsburg Bridge and improvements to public transport, made Brooklyn accessible. Brownsville, located in northeast Brooklyn opened its arms to tailors who were needed for its rapidly growing garment industry. This suited Sam Reles who had been a tailor in the Old Country and after Abe was born, the family settled in Brownsville. Unfortunately, it proved to be as much of a slum as the Lower East Side and had become a breeding ground for crime. It was this world that Abe Reles was soon drawn into having convinced himself that honest work was a scam and not for him. Much like youngsters idolising sports stars of old, the up and coming gangsters admired those that came before them and even took to adopting their nicknames.

Between the two World Wars Jewish gangsters emerged with colourful names such as Louis 'Lepke' Buchalter, Benjamin 'Bugsy' Siegel, Arthur 'Dutch Schultz' Flegenheimer, Meyer

'The Little Man' Lansky and Arnold 'The Brain' Rothstein. Some like Flegenheimer were psychopathic killers while others were degenerate gamblers, bootleggers and narcotic dealers. Not all came from impoverished backgrounds. Rothstein was the son of a wealthy and respected business man, yet he chose a life of gambling and narcotic smuggling which would make him a millionaire and eventually another murdered gangster.

Reles's role model was Max 'Kid Twist' Zweibach, a Jewish gang leader in the Lower East Side in the early 1900s. As he rose in the gangster ranks, Reles became known as Kid Twist. He recruited his first two partners, Martin 'Bugsy' Goldstein and Harry 'Pittsburgh Phil' Strauss and soon joined forces with a rival gang in Ocean Hill, a community adjacent to Brownsville. This gang comprised mainly Italians and was led by Harry 'Happy' Maione and Frank 'Dasher' Abbando. Together, the two gangs became known as the 'Combination' and the extra fire power allowed Reles to kill off his main rivals in Brownsville, the Shapiro brothers. However, the ever cunning Reles did not act before getting approval from the bosses of New York's gangster world. That meant talking to Umberto 'Albert' Anastasia, organised crime's power broker in Brooklyn.

By September 1931, with Anastasia's blessing, all of the Shapiro brothers were dead and Reles had achieved his own American Dream as the undisputed boss of Brownsville. However, he and his partners in crime were still working class thugs who could only dream of being part of the Syndicate's upper echelon. Reles's chance to move up in the world of organised crime came on 3 March, 1933 when he was summoned to meet one of the Syndicate's leaders, Louis Buchalter, known to all as 'Lepke'. The Syndicate had decided to set up its own murder operation and Reles and his colleagues were ready made for this purpose. It was agreed that they would kill only for the Syndicate and in return, would be allowed to run Brownsville how they saw fit. The Syndicate would also pay each of them a retainer of \$250 per week along with bonus payments for special jobs. The Brownsville boys subsequently travelled the country for the rest of the decade carrying out murders on behalf of the Syndicate. Their operation was run like any successful company and the American Press would eventually label them 'Murder Incorporated'. The most vicious of their number, Harry Strauss, actually yearned for stardom within the world of contract killing and proudly boasted about his record: at least one hundred murders.

Unlike Reles, Meyer Lansky was born around 1902 in Grodno on the Russian side of the Russia/Poland border. Nearly 70% of Grodno inhabitants were Jewish and with the accession of Czar Alexander III in 1881, new laws prohibited Jews from buying rural land, from freely attending university, from changing their names to non-Jewish ones and from 1894 onwards, all Jewish identity passes were marked with the word 'Jew'. The czarist government condoned pogroms and demonstrations against Jews, blaming them on Jewish exploitation of ordinary Russians. Grodno Jews formed a self-defence organisation, hiding weapons in their homes, learning how to shoot guns and meeting violence against them with violence.

The Lansky family settled in Brownsville in 1911 and moved to the Lower East Side of New York in 1914. Meyer's father struggled to support his family and while scornful of his father, he decided he would get rich and ensure that his mother always had the best. Impatient for

success, he rejected respectable professions and chose a life of crime instead. However Lansky carefully distanced himself from the 'dirty' crimes pursued by Reles like drugs, prostitution and murder.

Throughout the 1930s, Reles was picked up by New York cops every few months but he continued to carry out the bidding of the Syndicate. By 1940, he had become worn down by the monotony of jail and rumours about former colleagues testifying against him. His ever faithful wife Rose visited him in prison and begged him to make a deal with the authorities. With one child at home and another one on the way, she appealed to Reles's Jewish instincts to put family before all else. It was not long before he was sitting in District Attorney William O'Dwyer's office and offering to testify against his former partners in crime in exchange for complete immunity. Reluctantly, O'Dwyer and his assistant, Burton Turkus, agreed to the deal and Reles proceeded to astonish them by exposing the whole structure of organised crime in America. His photographic memory enabled him to reveal the details of at least 85 New York murders and hundreds nationwide. When Turkus asked Reles how he felt about committing murder, he replied that it was just a job that he got used to. So murdering someone at his mother's house was just bringing home work to do. Like all good sons, he made sure that his mother wasn't troubled with the boring details.

Eventually, thanks to Reles and others who turned informant to save their own skins, most of the major Jewish gangsters were put on trial and either imprisoned or executed. Even the feared Lepke was eventually prosecuted, thanks to the testimony of Reles and one of Lepke's own in-house killers, Allie 'Tick-Tock' Tannenbaum. As Lepke became increasingly paranoid about former associates testifying against him, he ordered countless murders from his prison cell. This killing spree proved to be in vain and on 4 March, 1944 he became the only major American gang leader to be executed. The last words Lepke heard as he died in the electric chair in Sing Sing Prison, were those of Rabbi Jacob Katz reciting Kaddish.

A small number of the Jewish gangsters did manage to live into old age. Meyer Lansky died of a heart attack in 1983 at the age of eight-one, having escaped the Lower east Side for the Upper West Side of Manhattan and one of the grandest apartment blocks overlooking Central Park. Allie Tannebaum walked away a free man and was later seen in Atlanta selling lampshades. As for Reles, he would not cash in on his deal with District Attorney O'Dwyer to "walk out clean" nor live to see the birth of his second child. Seventy five years ago, on 12 November, 1941, Reles plunged to his death from a sixth floor window of Coney Island's Half Moon Hotel. He was being held there under police protection along with several other Jewish gangsters. While the cause of his death remains a mystery to this day, it seems certain that Reles, who was loathed and feared by his former associates, was killed either by his fellow prisoners or his guards, paid to do the job. Remarkably, Reles's family along with the families of all of his fellow Jewish gangsters had little if any knowledge of his gangster life. Like people in other walks of life, they never involved their wives or families in their work. Having achieved the American Dream in such a brutal fashion, they wanted their children to live by honest and legal means.

By the end of World War Two, the Jewish gangster was no longer part of the world of organised crime. The wave of Jewish immigration to America from Europe had subsided, the ghettos began to break up and the Jews left for the suburbs. An entire Jewish gangster generation had been wiped out and the generation that followed opted for university and careers in respectable and profitable professions like medicine and law. While lurid newspaper headlines about the activities of Jewish gangsters had been an embarrassment to the respectable Jewish community, there was in some quarters a begrudging admiration for the physical protection they had afforded them. When the state of Israel was created after the war and struggling to survive, some of the remaining Jewish gangsters seemed to regard it as a metaphor for their own struggle to rise out of their American ghettos. The Irgun approached Jewish underworld figures in the US in 1947 and through fund-raising events and other donations around \$120,000 was raised for them. Meyer Lansky's old partner in crime, Bugsy Siegel had become outraged at the rise of antisemitism in Germany. He had even considered ordering a 'hit' on leading Nazi figures such as Joseph Goebbels and Hermann Goering. Lansky shared his outrage and was only too happy to make personal donations and support a fundraising event for the Haganah which raised \$10,000. Lansky also arranged for arms intended for Arab countries to be stolen and sent to Israel instead. When he moved to Florida he made a donation to a new synagogue being erected by local Jews who had actively supported Israel. Perhaps in middle age, Lansky was becoming nostalgic for his Jewish youth in Grodno and memories of his grandfather reading aloud from the Torah in their wooden synagogue. It would be wrong to glorify Jewish gangsters as some kind of latter-day Robin Hoods. However, in their time, they did contribute to their people's survival.

As the extent of the Holocaust became clear, a new breed of Jew emerged who drew on similar lessons learned by the Jewish gangsters decades before. As a child in Grodno, Poland, Meyer Lansky never forgot the soldier who had said to his neighbours "Why do you sit around like stupid sheep and allow them to kill you? Perhaps the ultimate legacy of the Jewish gangster in America manifested itself in the state of Israel and its 'tough Jews' determined to overcome insurmountable odds to survive. From Auschwitz to Entebbe in a single generation!