





by Susan Fishman Orlins

Gangsters genes guns & gamblers

These days, it's almost cool to be related to a (dead) Jewish mobster.

“My mother had told me he died in an automobile accident going to get me a birthday gift...I was 19 when my stepfather told me that there was a hit on my dad.”

BENNY GAMSON, AKA Benny the Meatball, was short, squat and sharp-eyed. He was a small time mobster, a *gonif*, a petty thief and crapshooter who branched out into organized crime in the corrupt Los Angeles of the 1940s. In 1945, Benny had a run-in with a nattily dressed fellow mobster named Mickey Cohen. After hammering Cohen senseless with a piece of lead pipe, Benny teamed up with hitman George Levinson. But despite a cocked Mauser under the bed sheets, a .32 in the closet and two sawed-off shotguns, Benny and George were gunned down *Godfather*-style at their Hollywood apartment on a hot August night. Neighbors reported seeing a black car race from the scene.

The gangland slaying remains unsolved to this day, but stories about Benny were passed down in hush-hush fashion through his family, finally reaching the ears of Josh Gamson, Benny's second cousin twice removed. “My father and his sister had heard bits and pieces,” says Gamson, 45. “Then someone doing research contacted my aunt, mentioning a

Benny, and it was confirmed that this was Benny ‘the Meatball.’”

A sociology professor at the University of San Francisco, Gamson was intrigued to discover a lawbreaker in the family. “I like collecting family lore,” he says. He read what he could, which was limited, since Benny wasn't a gangster of the stature of, say, fellow Jews Arnold Rothstein, Meyer Lansky and Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel, who have inspired books, films and plays. (Benny the Meatball does make it into *The Encyclopedia of Organized Crime* and figured in a 1948 movie, *Jinx Money*.) Josh Gamson searched for family members who had known his cousin. “Benny's sister said that he had a pharmacy,” says Gamson. “She referred to him as a good boy. She said he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Gamson's inquiries paid off when he con-

tacted Benny's daughter Michelle. She told him that her father was said to have buried his savings in a cigar box in a canyon in Los Angeles and to have given a safe deposit box key to his wife. But when he was killed, Michelle's mother panicked and threw the key away. The money was never found.

Michelle Gamson was four when he was slain. “My mother had told me he died in an automobile accident going to get me a birthday gift,” she says. It was her stepfather who later revealed the truth. “I was 19 when he told me that there was a hit on my dad,” she explains. “I wanted to contact Mickey Cohen but my mother said, ‘Don't get involved, don't stir nothing up.’”

She remembers her father lovingly, as a “genius” who watches over her. “My father was a very good man,” she says. “He was never convicted.”

NOW THAT MANY DECADES have flown by, scholars, enthusiasts and even descendants are now happily stirring up the past to take a closer look at Jewish gangsters. The savvy graduates of New York's street gangs, mostly impoverished children of immigrants, joined the underworld of the Roaring Twenties, becoming involved in shadowy dealings that—in addition to violent crime—included racketeering, gambling and bootlegging and, in a few cases, narcotics dealing.

Those who rose to notoriety remain household names. Anyone familiar with the character Meyer Wolfsheim in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, or Nathan Detroit in the Damon Runyon story, *The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown* (the basis of the musical *Guys and Dolls*), will recognize Arnold Rothstein. Born in 1882, he has been called “the J.P. Morgan of the underworld” and is credited with paving the way for Jews in organized crime. A professional gambler who later turned to bootlegging, Rothstein transformed petty thievery into big business. According to Rich Cohen, author of the 1998 book, *Tough Jews: Fathers, Sons and Gangster Dreams*, Rothstein was one of the first to see Prohibition as a means to



Mugshots of Louis "Lepke" Buchalter

wealth and who “understood the truths of early century capitalism (hypocrisy, exclusion, greed) and came to dominate them.” Rothstein, best known as the man who fixed the 1919 World Series, was a rich man's son who showed young hoodlums of the Bowery how to have style. Indeed, Sicilian-American gangster “Lucky” Luciano would later say, Rothstein “taught me how to dress.”

Louis “Lepke” Buchalter, boss of Murder, Inc., the gang of Jews and Italians that carried out hundreds of murders, most of them unsolved, on behalf of the mob, is often considered the most ruthless. His colleagues in crime included Arthur “Dutch Schultz” Flegenheimer, Irving “Waxey” Gordon, Abner “Longy” Zwillman and Morris “Moe” Dalitz.

As in other professions, Jews were noted for their intelligence, particularly Meyer Lansky. “Lansky was a genius, a visionary, who built Las Vegas,” says Jonathan Sarna, professor of

American Jewish history at Brandeis University. “On the other hand, had they been rabbis, scholars, doctors, lawyers, it would have been more respectable. To be a gangster, especially one who got caught, was a *shanda*.”

Now that the American gangster era is fodder for popular culture, the *shanda* element has nearly disappeared. “Gangsters may have been shocking at the time but today, several generations later, they’re exotic,” says Sarna. That gangsters from previous generations are now to some extent pop icons should not be surprising. “America has always had a certain interest in outlaws,” he says, “and once they are dead and the whole issue is history there is a certain excitement about it.”

In their time, gangsters operated with a certain aura—real or imagined—of wealth, glamour and power, in contrast to the powerless feelings experienced by many Jewish immigrants and later to the sense of victimhood



Mugshots of Meyer Lansky

“At times the criminal ancestor almost becomes a folk hero: People feel, ‘I’m not like that but they’re making movies about him.’ So they feel a sense of pride without the baggage.”

brought on by the Holocaust. “There were Jews who said, ‘We’re oppressed and we need some tough Jews,’” says Sarna. “People admired them for being ‘alrightniks,’ for ‘making it’ in America.”

But generally gangsters produced more shame than security for their families. This shame has begun to fade, however. “The higher the grass on the grave, the less you feel the responsibility,” says Washington, DC forensic psychiatrist Lise Van Susteren. “People lose the sense of outrage. Also, there are no longer people around who are suffering from the criminal acts. At times the criminal

ancestor almost becomes a folk hero: People feel, ‘I’m not like that but they’re making movies about him.’ So it’s a sense of pride without the baggage.”

Although there are (and always will be) Jews who stray into illegal territory, the storied era of the cigar-smoking, womanizing Jewish gangster-thugs packing heat has vanished. “For the most part it was a one-generation phenomenon, distinguishing it from the Italian experience,” Sarna says. “There was no desire to see the youngsters go into the family business.”

THERE’S A CRIMINAL in every Jewish family, according to author and genealogist Ron Arons, including his own. Arons, 52, has made it his job to help people who are curious to dig up information about shady ancestors.

There are criminals whose sons became rabbis and rabbis whose sons wound up as criminals. Arons’ great grandfather Isaac is among the latter. It all came to light when Arons innocently set out to explore his forbears—searching through birth certificates, marriage licenses and death certificates—and turned up three different birthplaces for Isaac. But what really captured his attention were criminal records, which revealed that Isaac had been an inmate at Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, New York.

Arons’ parents had died before he learned

Continued on page 58

about Isaac, and he felt as though he had been "struck by a thunderbolt. I was raised as a goody two-shoes," he says. Yet looking back, he remembered a boyhood incident that hinted at an errant ancestor. While visiting his grandparents' home in Brooklyn, he remarked lightly, "If I'm a bad boy today, I'll have to go to Sing Sing." His grandmother pulled him aside and scolded, "Never say 'Sing Sing' in front of your grandfather!"

Arons went on to write *The Jews of Sing Sing* and give presentations on genealogy and Jewish gangsters. One Sunday afternoon last spring about 30 members of the Jewish Genealogical Society gathered for one such presentation in a lower level room at the Jewish Community Center of Northern Virginia. Arons—tall and ruddy-cheeked with short gray hair and a ready smile—spoke openly about his great grandfather.

Arons then asked the audience, most of

whom would qualify for senior discounts, how many knew of criminals in their past. Roughly a third raised their hands. One woman thrust both arms into the air and shouted, "Two!"

He remarked lightly, "If I'm a bad boy today, I'll have to go to Sing Sing." His grandmother pulled him aside and scolded, "Never say 'Sing Sing' in front of your grandfather!"

ARON'S VAST network of people investigating their ancestors includes

Sharon Blumberg, whose grandfather, Calman Cooper, was executed at Sing Sing when she was six months old. On a balmy April day in 1950, he and three cronies had held up a *Reader's Digest* truck, stealing \$40,000 and leaving a messenger to die from a bullet wound. Although an insanity plea by Cooper, the mastermind and lookout, proved unsuccessful, he managed to delay his execution for several years (considerably longer than fellow inmates Julius and Ethel Rosenberg). One of his accomplices turned state's witness and was sentenced to 10 to 20 years; as for the others, says Blumberg, "three guys, all Jewish, all executed the same day."

In 2005, Blumberg heard Arons give a talk about Jewish inmates at Sing Sing. She already knew about her grandfather and was anxious to fill in some holes. "It was a match made in heaven," she says of the meeting. "Doing research has been good for me."

Israel Faces a Serious Environmental & Agricultural Problem

Problem: Israeli beef cattle are failing to thrive in their desert environment

Poor disease resistance, genetic diseases, and high losses due to predators are contributing to this. Soaring feed costs, the inability to graze on shrubs, tree leaves, or cactus only adds to the problem. Also, calf losses (as high as 30%), low reproduction rates and poor mothering skills, as well as birth complications are factors.

Solution: Our Texas Longhorn Cattle Eco Project will be helping Israeli farms

Longhorns can eat invasive shrubs and cacti, thus decreasing fire hazards. This also solves the problem of rising feed costs. They have higher reproduction rates and very low loss rates. Longhorns have excellent calving and mothering abilities, protecting their calves from predators.



A Guidestar.org
Not-For-Profit # 74-3177354

Help us bring Texas Longhorn Cattle to Israel! We need your donations to make this a reality.

Contact: Robin Rosenblatt M.Sc. • (650) 631-9270 • 815 Hill St. # 5, Belmont, CA 94002 • robinrosenblatt@batnet.com.



Although close friends know about her grandfather, Blumberg says she doesn't bring the subject up at cocktail parties. However, she wishes it had been out in the open earlier within the family. "This kind of thing causes rifts," she says. "It did for my dad with his mother; he could never get to the bottom of it." Her grandmother divorced Cooper and, unable to care for her son, sent him to an orphanage. "Being in the orphanage was difficult and being in the dark as an adult was still tough. Knowledge is power; silence is more damaging."

The family of 81-year-old Jules Ornstein, unlike Blumberg's, hid nothing from the kids. At Ornstein's bar mitzvah, a cardboard box sat by the door of the shul for friends and relatives to deposit their guns upon entering. "Talk about gangsters was common in my family," says Ornstein, who remembers sitting shiva for his cousin "Bugsy" Goldstein, an operative in Murder, Inc., who died in the electric chair after his buddy, Abe "Kid Twist" Reles, ratted him out to the Feds.

Ornstein's father, a lawyer, had an office near Times Square. "He installed a secure door and lock, which could be opened only by a button under his desk, because he had refused to represent some gangsters and he was afraid they would come to get him," says Ornstein. "I was six or seven and thought it was exciting." As an adult, Ornstein's fascination with criminals led him to purchase an electric chair, complete with electrodes and head plate, from the state of Nebraska after its Supreme Court outlawed executions.

Unlike others Ron Arons has worked with, Geoff Fein never sought him out or attended one of his workshops. Instead the two were brought together by a book review of Rich Cohen's *Tough Jews* on Amazon.com. Fein is the grandson of "Dopey Benny" Fein, a small time gangster who began his criminal career as a pickpocket on the streets of Manhattan's Lower East Side, then graduated to labor

racketeering. Arons, who pays attention to these things, noticed that Fein had corrected Cohen's report that Dopey Benny was fatally shot in the back of a police car. "A great deal of info on my grandfather, 'Dopey Benny,' is wrong, such as when, where, and how he died," wrote Fein. His grandfather, he says, died from cancer and emphysema years after going straight and becoming a tailor, a trade that he learned from his father.

Fein says his father told him that Dopey Benny denied ever having killed anyone. But his father did tell him that Dopey Benny used to show him a price list he kept in his pocket. "It was what he

At Ornstein's bar mitzvah, a cardboard box sat by the door of the shul for relatives to deposit their guns upon entering. "Talk about gangsters was common in my family."

would charge to break an arm, a leg, a nose. His prices ranged from \$50 to \$60 for broken bones up to \$600 to break up a picket line," Fein says.

ONE OF THE PROUDEST of these baggage-free descendants may be Gerald Kauvar. A "wanted" poster of Kauvar's grandfather's half-brother, Louis "Lepke" Buchalter, the big boss of Murder, Inc., hangs in his office at George Washington University, where he teaches about university presidencies. Kauvar speculates that Lepke, known as one of the most ruthless of all, turned to crime for the thrill and easy money.

He was arrested for the final time in 1939. The poet Robert Lowell, who served time in a New York jail as a conscientious objector in 1943, immortalized Lepke in a 1976 poem, *Memories of West Street and Lepke*. In it, he described his fellow inmate Lepke as a "flabby, bald, lobotomized" czar who had a segregated cell with "things forbidden to the common man" and who "drifted in a sheepish calm" waiting for his execution, which did not occur until 1944.

Kauvar grew up far from the West Street jail in Boulder, Colorado, where another great uncle—Lepke's half brother—was a rabbi. He learned about Lepke for the first time when he attended college in Denver. "I used to commute with a friend to Denver from Boulder," he says. "On one of these rides, my friend said, 'Hey, I saw your uncle on TV last night.'" What the friend saw was an actor playing the role of Buchalter on the TV series, *The Untouchables*. "I imagine his parents mentioned the family connection to him," says Kauvar. "My guess is that people in the community knew he was their rabbi's half brother but my sister and I had never heard of him."

Kauvar asked his mother about it and was shocked to learn that the story was true. "My parents married at the height of the Depression in 1932," he says. "My mother told me, 'He gave us \$500 as a wedding present but we gave it back, because it was blood money.' And that's all she would ever say about him, other than that he was the black sheep of the family."

Lepke was one of 11 children, whose siblings and half-siblings included a dentist and an Orthodox rabbi. He was the only one who strayed, though his half-brother offered to send him to college.

Kauvar doesn't sound the least perturbed as he recounts this family story. In perhaps the ultimate sign that the *shanda* of being related to a gangster has lost its sting, Kauvar offhandedly mentions that he named his late poodle "Lepke." ❧