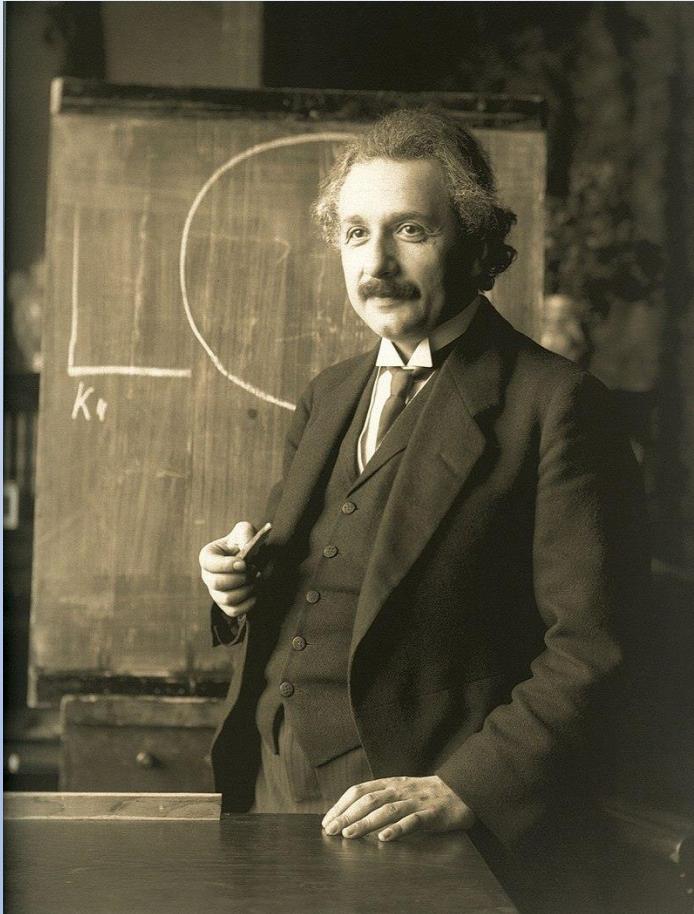


Jewish Tough Guys

Gangsters and Boxers

From the 1880s to the 1980s

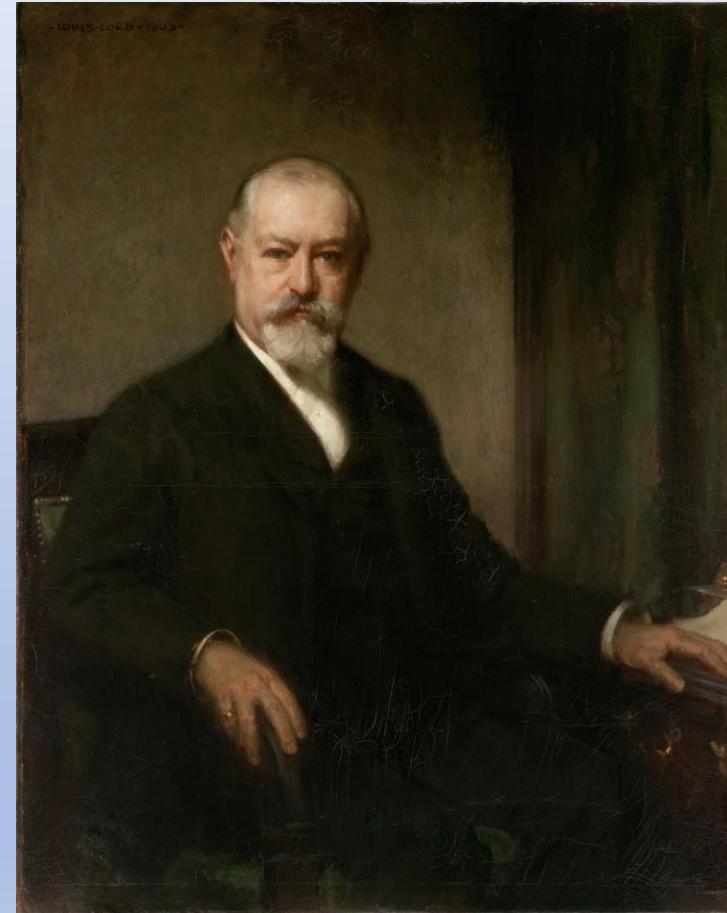
Jews Are Smart



When we picture a Jew
the image that comes to
mind for many people is a
scientist like **Albert
Einstein**

Jews Are Successful

Some people might picture **Jacob Schiff**, one of the wealthiest and most influential men in American history



Shtarkers and Farbrekhers



We should also remember that there were also Jews like Max Baer, the heavyweight Champion of the World in 1934 who killed a man in the ring, and Jacob “Gurrah” Shapiro, who “helped” settle labor disputes.



Why Have They Been Forgotten?

“The Jewish gangster has been forgotten because no one wants to remember him , because my grandmother won’t talk about him, because he is something to be ashamed of.”

- Richard Cohen, **Tough Jews: Fathers, Sons, and Gangster Dreams**

Why Should You Care?

- Because this is part of OUR history.
- Because it speaks to the immigrant experience, an experience that links us to many peoples across many times.
- Because it is relevant today to understand the relationship of crime and combat to poverty and ostracism.

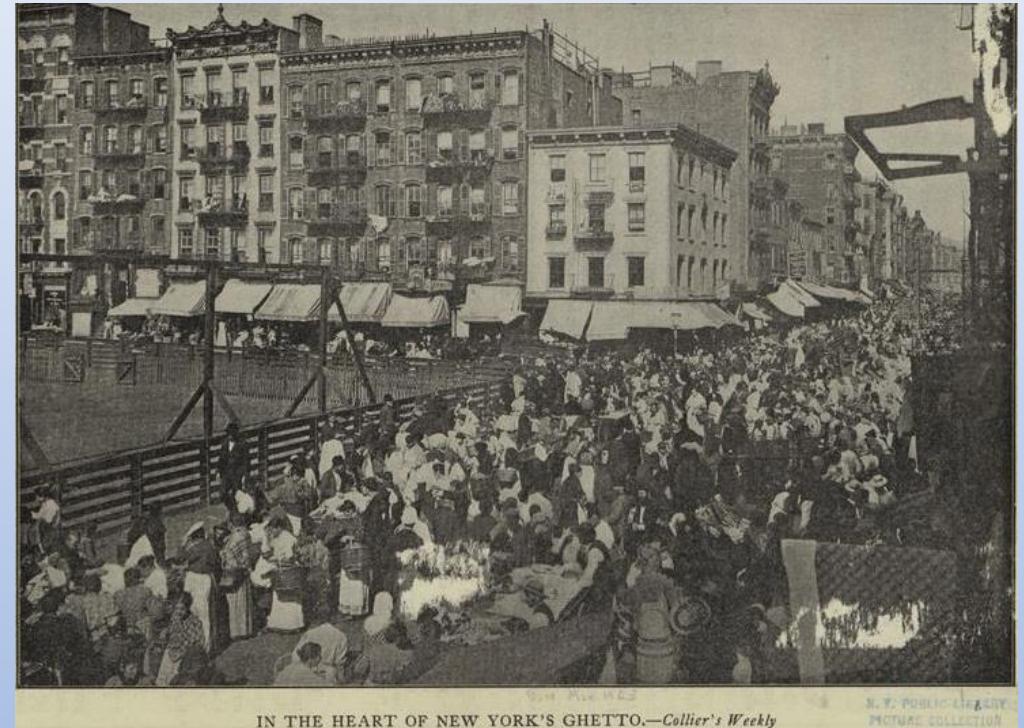
Anti-Semitism In America



- Beginning with Peter Stuyvesant in 1654, Jews were seen as "deceitful", "very repugnant", and "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ".
- In 1862, Ulysses S. Grant issues General Order 11, expelling all Jews from Tennessee, Mississippi and Kentucky. (Rescinded.)
- In 1915, Leo Frank is lynched in Marietta, Georgia.
- 1921 and 1924 quota laws are passed aimed at restricting the number of Jews entering America.
- Jews were not the only target of these laws. Italians were also seen as a threat to America as exemplified by the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1921.
- Both Jews and Italians were associated with communism and unions, both of which were considered threats to America.

Immigration to Ghettoization

- Immigration from the Pale of Settlement to America as a result of the pogroms – 1880 to 1924. (Beginning of the American quota system.)
- 2 million Eastern European Jews settle in America.
- New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, and Chicago – all had Jewish neighborhoods.
- In 1880 the Lower East Side had 250,000 residents, by 1920 the population was 4 million.
- Colliers Weekly of 1903 referred to the Lower East Side as “New York’s Ghetto.”
- The NY Times of 1910 called the area “Poverty Hollow.”



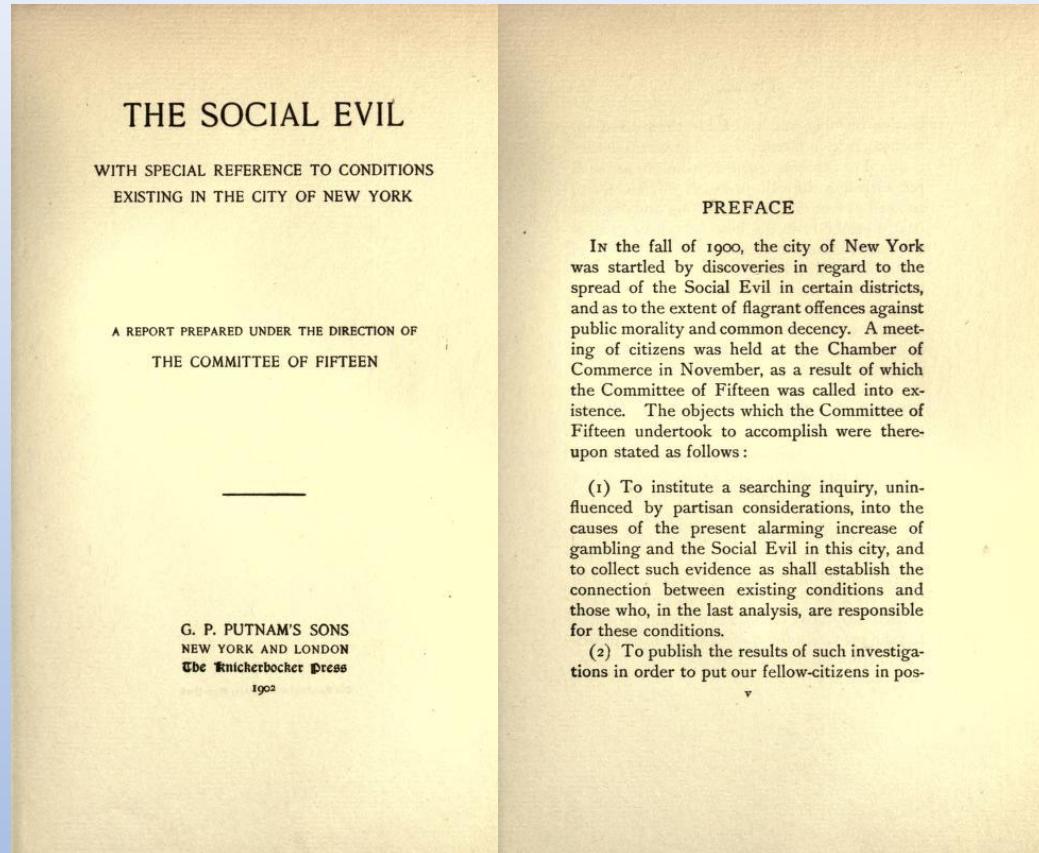
The Reaction - Becoming Tough

“One man- I don’t remember his name, but I wish I did- held a meeting in my grandfather’s house. ‘Jews,’ he shouted, ‘Why do you just stand around like stupid sheep and let them come and kill you, steal your money, kill your sons and rape your daughters? Aren’t you ashamed? You must stand up and fight. You are men like other men. A Jew can fight. We have no arms, but it doesn’t matter. We can use sticks and stones. Fight back! Don’t be frightened. Hit them and they’ll run. If you are going to die, die fighting.’

“This speech is burned into my memory. I carried the words with me when I finally traveled with my mother to America and the Lower East Side. I remembered those words when I fought back at the Irish as a boy on the East Side. They were like flaming arrows in my head.”

- Meier Suchowlański of Grodno, Poland (AKA Meyer Lansky)

Crime on the Lower East Side



PREFACE

In the fall of 1900, the city of New York was startled by discoveries in regard to the spread of the Social Evil in certain districts, and as to the extent of flagrant offences against public morality and common decency. A meeting of citizens was held at the Chamber of Commerce in November, as a result of which the Committee of Fifteen was called into existence. The objects which the Committee of Fifteen undertook to accomplish were thereupon stated as follows:

(1) To institute a searching inquiry, uninfluenced by partisan considerations, into the causes of the present alarming increase of gambling and the Social Evil in this city, and to collect such evidence as shall establish the connection between existing conditions and those who, in the last analysis, are responsible for these conditions.

(2) To publish the results of such investigations in order to put our fellow-citizens in pos-

v

- Published in 1902, this was an early attempt to understand crime and the causes of crime.
- The first section dealt with prostitution, which the authors saw as a consequence of poverty and the broken family.
- A survey conducted by the US Immigration Commission of 2,000 prostitutes arrested in New York found that the single largest ethnic group was the Jews.
- Motche Goldberg, called the “King of the Vice Trust”, owned eight brothels on the Lower East Side, managed 114 women and earned a spectacular \$4,000 a month.
- Jewish gangs provided protection for these enterprises.

The Eastman Gang and Kid Twist



Edward "Monk" Eastman

Edward "Monk" Eastman was the founder of the gang, which operated along Rivington Street on the Lower East Side. One of the first non-Irish gangs to operate in this area, by 1900 the members were almost all Jews from the surrounding area and Brooklyn. The gang soon graduated from petty theft to prostitution and gambling, running many "disorderly houses" (brothels) along Allen Street. In 1903, Eastman was sent to prison. A power struggle broke out between Eastman's lieutenants, Richie Fitzpatrick and Max "Kid Twist" Zwerbach. Fitzpatrick was found shot dead and the gang belonged to the Kid.

The first of the Jewish gangs, the Eastmans had a feud with the Five Points gang run by Paul Kelly. In 1908, Zwerbach and other gang members would be gunned down and control would pass to "Big" Jack Zelig, born Zelig Harry Lefkowitz. Under Zelig, the gang would grow to 75 members, including affiliates such as the Lenox Avenue Gang, run by Harry "Gyp the Blood" Horowitz.



Max "Kid Twist" Zwerbach

Organized Crime

Under Zelig's leadership, the gang's activities soon expanded to include labor racketeering. Benjamin "Dopey" Fein and other gang members would serve as "sluggers" working for either the unions or companies in the Garment District. Or both. At one point, Fein was making \$20,000 a year as a slugger.

Fein's nickname came from his eyes, which always seemed to be half-closed.

In 1915, Fein was convicted of the murder of Frederick Strauss, but would only serve 2 years. In 1917, Fein went "straight" becoming a successful garment businessman. In 1931, Fein was arrested along with Samuel Hirsch and Samuel Rubin after throwing acid on local Brooklyn businessman Mortimer Kahn. In 1941, Fein would be arrested again by Thomas Dewey for receiving stolen goods.



"Dopey" Benny Fein

Lepke and Gurrah

Jacob "Gurrah" Shapiro was born in Odessa, Russia, in 1899. Louis "Lepke" Buchalter was born that same year on the Lower East Side. The two met as boys when they attempted to rob the same pushcart. Instead of fighting, the two formed a life-long partnership, with Lepke as the brains and Gurrah as the muscle. Following the advice of Arnold Rothstein, the two transitioned from petty criminals to "sluggers", ultimately gaining control of the unions in the garment district. At first they worked for Jacob "Little Augie" Orgen, who had been born into an Orthodox Jewish family, but was disowned by his father. Orgen would later work for "Dopey" Benny Fein. It was "Little Augie" who first began the process of infiltrating the unions to skim off dues and extort kickbacks from the garment factory owners.

Shapiro and Buchalter killed Orgen in a drive-by in 1927 and solidified their control over unions. They were instrumental in forming the enforcement wing of the National Crime Syndicate called Murder Inc.



Louis "Lepke" Buchalter

Rothstein and His Boys



Arnold "the Brain" Rothstein

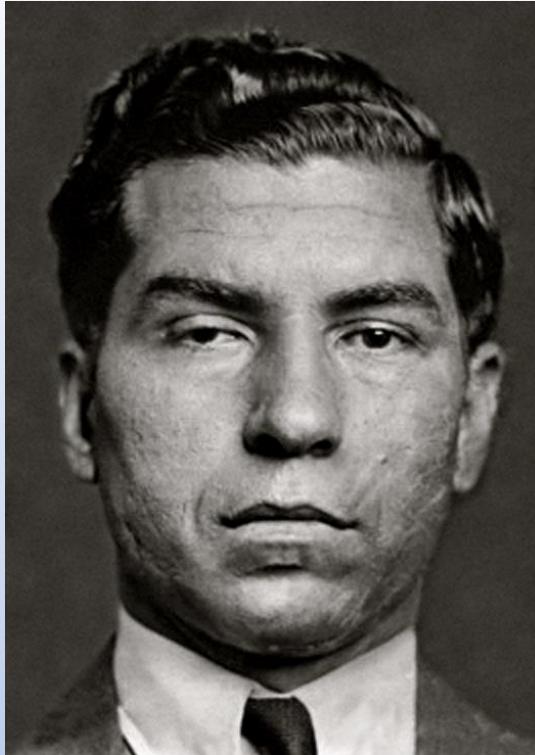
Arnold "the Brain" Rothstein was the son of a prosperous Jewish businessman so well known for his moral character that he was called "Abe the Just." Abraham was an observant Jew who left his wallet at home on the Sabbath. Arnold would take the cash on Friday, use it for gambling and then return the money before the theft was noticed. In 1910, at the age of 28, Arnold opened a gambling casino in Manhattan. By 1919, he was facing charges of having "fixed" the World Series, an allegation that would earn him immortality in *The Great Gatsby*. While the players from the Chicago White Sox were on trial, all the records, minutes and signed confessions somehow disappeared.

Arnold frequently served as a mediator, settling gang disputes, from his "office" at Lindy's restaurant, which would be referenced in *Guys and Dolls*.

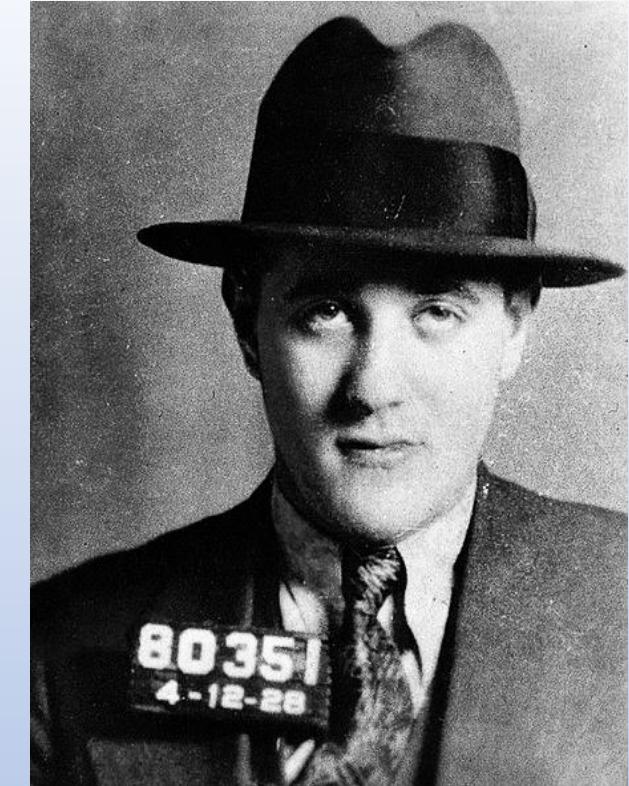
On November 4th, 1928, Arnold would be shot and fatally wounded at the Park Central Hotel.



Meier Suchowlański aka
Meyer Lansky



Salvatore Lucania aka
Charles "Lucky" Luciano



Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel

The Syndicate

"We're bigger than General Motors."

Waxey Gordon and Bootlegging

Born Irving Wexler in 1888, Waxey Gordon had been part of “Dopey” Benny Fein’s gang until he was noticed by Rothstein. It was Gordon that approached Rothstein about bootlegging and Gordon was soon in charge of the operation, earning an estimated \$2 million a year and buying mansions in Manhattan and Philadelphia.

After Rothstein’s death, Gordon began to feud with the Syndicate. Lansky and Luciano gave Gordon over to US Attorney Thomas Dewey who convicted him of tax evasion.



“Waxey” Gordon

The Purple Gang

The National Prohibition or Volstead Act of 1920 made the smuggling of liquor into a multimillion dollar business for the criminals. The gangs of Michigan had a head start since liquor had been illegal in Michigan since 1917. Abe, Joe, Raymond and Izzy Burnstein began to bring liquor in from Canada, expanding from their prior activities of extortion, hijacking and theft. The origin of the gang's name supposedly came about from a shopkeeper saying "*They're rotten, purple like the color of bad meat, they're a Purple Gang.*"



The Purple Gang

The War Between The Dons



Joe "the Boss"
Masseria

Giuseppe "Joe the Boss" Masseria was a Mafia boss in New York, controlling what would become the Genovese crime family.

Maranzano came to America after WW I and opened a real estate business that was a front for his bootlegging. Both men were referred to as "Mustache Petes" because of their Old World ways. Mobsters were being driven out of Italy and Sicily by the rise of Mussolini.

Lucky Luciano worked for Masseria, but would betray him to Maranzano, getting control of the remnants of the gang. In September of 1931, four Jewish gangsters disguised as cops would visit Maranzano's office and execute him.



Salvatore "Little
Caesar" Maranzano

MURDER INCORPORATED



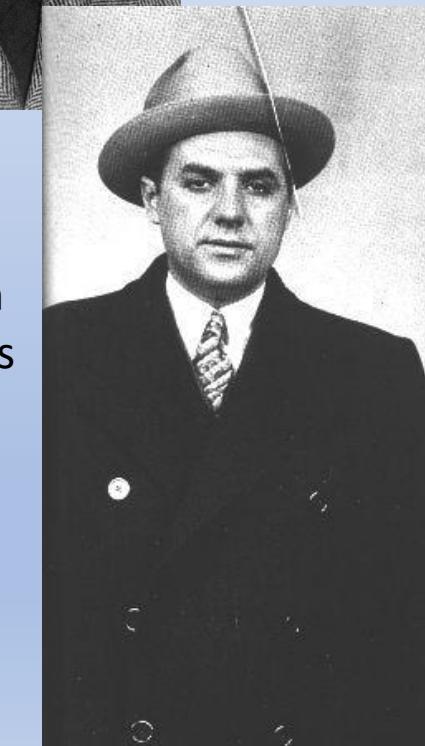
The execution of Maranzano proved that Jews could provide enforcement for the Syndicate without becoming entwined in a web of revenge and retribution. But where would the Syndicate find a group of cold-blooded killers willing to carry out executions? The answer was at the candy store known as **Midnight Rose's** at the corner of Livonia and Saratoga in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

Abe "Kid Twist" Reles was the leader of a gang that had won a war in Brownsville against the **Shapiro brothers**. Harry "Pittsburgh Phil" Strauss had been recruited to help Reles. Strauss would go on to carry out between 100 to possibly as many as 500 mob hits. Another member of the gang was Martin "Bugsy" Goldstein.

At first the gang reported to Lepke and Shapiro. Later command would be transferred to Albert Anastasia.



Abe "Kid Twist" Reles



Harry "Pittsburgh Phil" Strauss

Lansky Versus the Bund

"We wanted to show them that Jews would not always sit back and accept insults. The Nazi scumbags were meeting one night on the second floor. Nat Arno and I went upstairs and threw stink bombs into the room where the creeps were. As they came out of the room, running from the horrible odor of the stink bombs and running down the steps to go into the street to escape, our boys were waiting with bats and iron bars. It was like running a gauntlet. Our boys were lined up on both sides and we started hitting, aiming for their heads or any other part of their bodies, with our bats and irons. The Nazis were screaming blue murder. This was one of the most happy moments of my life."

Epitaphs – The End of an Era

- The Jewish gangster was a dominant force in American crime the period before World War I until after World War II, with some notable exceptions. How did it end?
- Violence was the most common ending. Arthur Simon Flegenheimer, better known as “Dutch” Schultz, ran a bootlegging and numbers operation out of the Bronx extending into Harlem. Some members of The Syndicate held him responsible for the shooting of Arnold Rothstein. He would face scrutiny both from US Attorney Thomas Dewey and from the IRS. Legend says that Schultz went to a meeting and asked permission to kill Dewey. In 1935, Schultz would be gunned down at the Palace Chop House in Newark by Charles Workman and Emanuel “Mendy” Weiss, two members of Murder Inc. under orders from Lepke.
- Abe “Kid Twist” Reles, who had founded Murder Incorporated was arrested in 1940 and charged with a number of murders. He would turn into a government witness, implicating Mendy Weiss, Harry Strauss, Irving “Knadles” Nitzberg, “Bugsy” Goldstein and other members of Murder Incorporated. He was also to testify in the murder of a union longshoreman, a crime that would have implicated Albert Anastasia. Anastasia had helped run Murder Inc. but was also a member of the Cosa Nostra. While under police guard Reles fell or was thrown from a sixth floor hotel window. The newspapers dubbed him "The Canary Who Could Sing, But Couldn't Fly".
- The Federal government pursued Meyer Lansky for decades, never being able to charge him with anything more serious than gambling. In 1970, Lansky would flee to Israel. In 1972, he would be extradited to the US. In 1974 he would be acquitted. In 1983 he would die at home of lung cancer at the age of 80.

The Rise of the Jewish Boxer



“Slapsie Maxie” Rosenbloom

- Parallels to the Jewish gangster - same times and neighborhoods. Perhaps similar motivation.
- From 1910 until 1940, there were 26 Jewish world champions across 8 weight classes.
- Almost 33% of all professional boxers during this era were Jewish. Yet only 16% of the champions were Jewish, underperforming.
- Harvard President Charles Eliot speaking to the Menorah Society in 1907 said that Jews “are distinctly inferior in stature and physical development . . . to any other race.” His recommendation was that it would be good if “many of you joined the militia.”

Before America - Mendoza the Jew



Daniel Mendoza, better known as “Mendoza the Jew” was the boxing champion of England from 1792 until 1795. As a bare knuckles boxer he was undefeated in 27 fights. He would go on to develop the “scientific style” of boxing that included innovations such as “side-stepping.” Because of his revolutionary technique, he would become the first middleweight (5’7”, 160 pounds) to win the heavyweight title. He would open a boxing academy and publish *The Art of Boxing* based on his methods.

Harry “The Human Hairpin” Harris

- Born in Chicago in 1880, Harry became the first Jewish boxing world champion in 1901.
- Harry and his twin brother Sammy were given their first pair of boxing gloves as a Hanukkah present.
- Harry turned pro at age 16. He stood 5'8" tall and weighed only 96 pounds. He compensated for his lack of muscle with his shiftiness and reach.
- He defeated English boxer Pedlar Palmer to become the champion. In 1902 he would retire, make a brief comeback in 1905, and retire again in 1907. He lived until 1959 and was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2002.



Slapsie Maxie Rosenbloom

Max Everitt Rosenbloom was born in Leonard's Bridge, Connecticut in 1907. By 1930, he had won the World Light Heavyweight Championship, a title that he would hold until 1934. His nickname was derived from his open gloved style of striking an opponent. Known for his ability to shift and move, he still received many blows to the head that would lead to his eventual deterioration. In 1937, he accepted a role in a Hollywood film. He became a character actor, playing the "big guy" in a number of films. He would retire from boxing in 1939, opening Slapsie Maxie's comedy clubs in LA and SF.

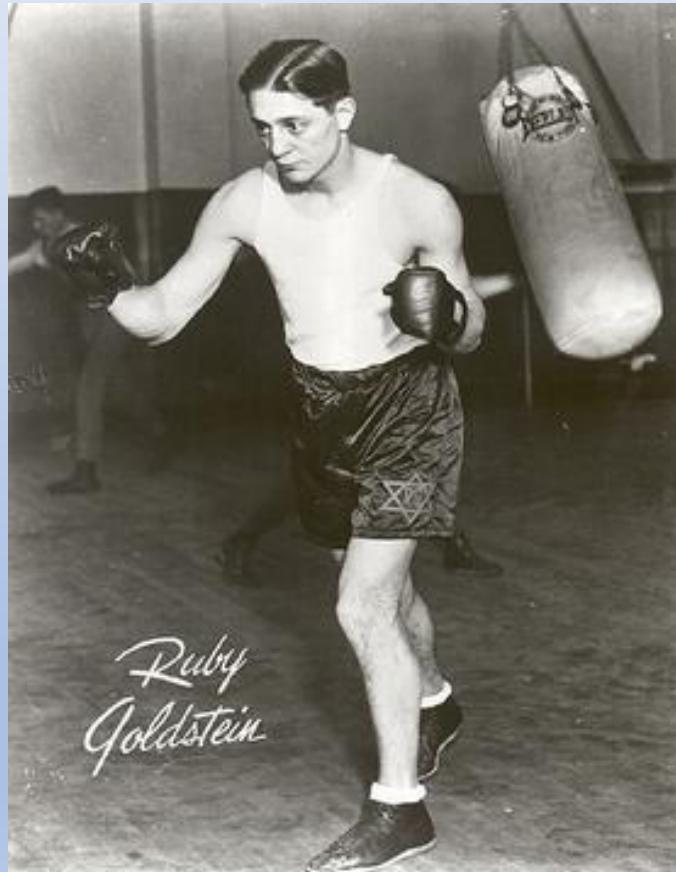


“Kingfish” Levinsky

- Born Harris Kraków in 1910, his family sold fish on Maxwell Street in what was Chicago's old Jewish ghetto.
- He legally changed his name to King Levinsky (the press called him “Kingfish”) and his boxing career spanned the period 1928 to 1939.
- A 1932 *Time* article said of him, “If you defined the efficiency of a prize-fighter by his ability in the ring, Harry Krakow ('Kingfish Levinsky') would not rate better than tenth among U. S. heavyweights. Last year he had 15 fights, won only eight. If you defined efficiency as a fighter's ability to earn money at his trade, Kingfish Levinsky might rank as best fighter in the U. S.”
- His style was described as “slapstick.” He had an engaging “entourage” including his sister known as “Leapin' Lena” Levy.



The Jewel of the Ghetto



- Reuven "Ruby" Goldstein was born on Cherry Street on the Lower East Side in 1907.
- His mother, a widow, took in sewing and washing to feed her 4 children.
- Ruby dropped out of school at 14 to take an office job, but by 16 he had become a boxer.
- His record was 54 wins to 6 losses, with 38 KOs.
- Despite his success he was said to be unable to take a blow to the chin.
- In 1926 he lost a match to Billy Alger by TKO. It was suspected that Waxey Gordon may have influenced the outcome.

The Boxer Who Wore The Star of David

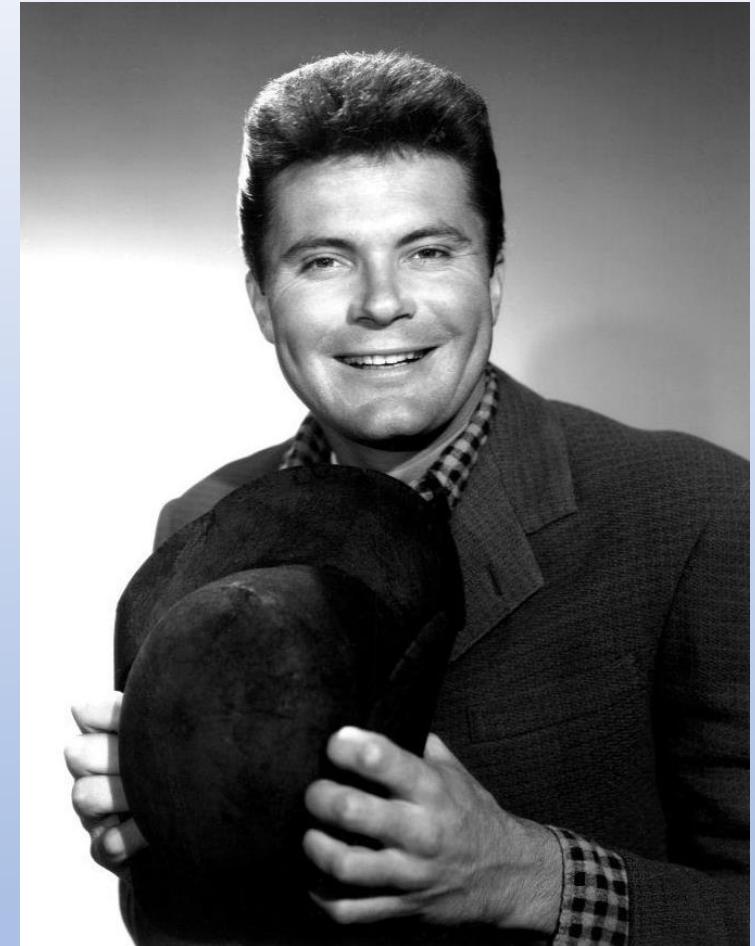
- Maximilian Adelbert "Max" Baer, born 1909 in Nebraska.
- Becomes a professional boxer in 1929.
- In a 1930 bout, Baer kills Frankie Campbell.
- In 1933, 5 months after a fight with Baer, boxer Ernie Schaaf dies. Baer is charged with manslaughter.
- After that fight, Baer starts working with Jack Dempsey.
- In 1933, at Yankee Stadium, Baer beats Max Schmeling, "Hitler's boxer."
- In 1934, Baer beats Primo Carnera to become Heavyweight Champion of the World
- In 1935, Baer is defeated by "Cinderella Man" James J. Braddock.
- He continued to box for a time, but also became a film actor, appearing in over 20 movies, including a comedy with Slapsie Maxie.



Max Baer Defeating Max Schmeling In 1933

Fathers and Sons

- While Jewish boxers and gangsters were dominant elements in the period between the World Wars, they did not want their children to follow in their footsteps.
- They wanted their children to be doctors and lawyers and actors.
- Violence, whether in the ring or out, was thrust on them by poverty and ostracism from American Society.

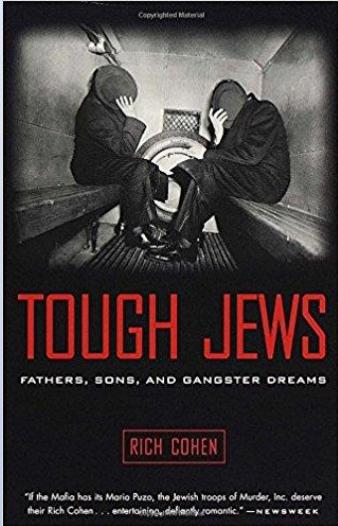


Max Baer Jr. as Jethro Bodine

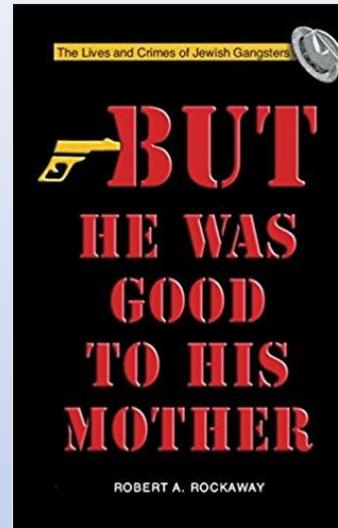
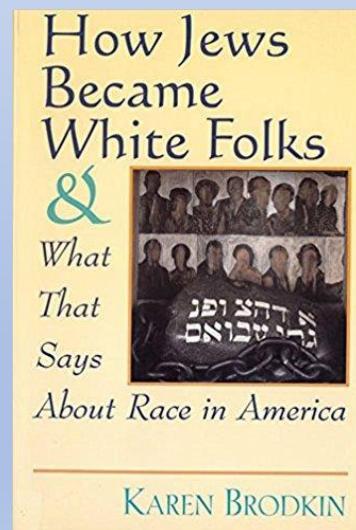
The End of an Era

- There are still Jewish boxers and Jewish criminals, but the age of the Tough Jew in America is over.
- External Factors – After World War II, Jews by and large achieved acceptance and success in America. Poverty and the ghetto life were left behind.
- Internal Factors – Unlike the Italians and Sicilians, the members of the *Kosher Nostra* did not see their criminal enterprise as something to be passed down. Lansky was proud of his son attending West Point and going to work for the Federal government. Waxey Gordon's eldest son went to medical school at UNC.
- Jewish boxers were by and large reluctant, looking ahead to careers as actors or comics.

Recommended Readings



**Tough Jews : Fathers, Sons,
and Gangster Dreams**
- by Rich Cohen



But He Was Good to His Mother: The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters
- by Robert A. Rockaway

How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America
- by Karen Brodkin