

From Prohibition to Plutocrats: The Untold Story of the Demise of Jewish Organized Crime in early to mid-20th Century America

Introduction:

“Michael, we’re bigger than U.S. Steel,” said Hyman Roth to Michael Corleone, head of the Corleone crime family in Martin Scorsese’s academy award winning *Godfather* trilogy.¹ Roth was a fictional character based on Meyer Lansky,² one of the most influential Jewish gangsters in American history who, the year before his death at the age of 80, was awarded a place on the inaugural 1982 *Forbes 400* list of richest Americans.³

In addition to the Lansky based character’s appearance in the *Godfather* trilogy, Jewish American gangsters have been featured in several high-profile Hollywood films over the past 50 years including, *Mobsters*, *Bugsy*, *Casino*, *Billy Bathgate*, *Once Upon a Time in America*, and most recently the 2021 film *Lansky*.⁴

While the provenance of the Roth/Lansky “U.S. Steel” quote comparing mob earnings and influence to the massive U.S. Steel corporation is murky, Lansky and his longtime partner Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel were undisputedly two of the most well-known American organized crime figures of their time. Despite Lansky and Siegel’s notoriety, the widespread role of American Jews in organized crime in early to mid-20th century America is not well known.⁵ A number of Lansky and Siegel’s American Jewish gangster contemporaries were amongst the most powerful and feared organized crime figures of their time. One of the most storied murder-for-hire operations in history, Murder, Inc., operated throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s

across the United States and had a significant Jewish presence. It was suspected of being involved in hundreds of murders-- sometimes charging as little as \$1 for a “hit” (around \$20 today). The group was led by Louis “Lepke” Buchalter,⁶ a Jewish mobster who, to date, is the only American organized crime figure ever to have been executed by the federal government.⁷

Other notables dot the archives. Moe Dalitz was a Jewish gangster involved in bootlegging and illegal gambling who started his underworld career as an associate of Detroit’s much feared Purple Gang.⁸ Along with Lansky, Dalitz made it onto the *Forbes 400* inaugural list in 1982, based on his ownership of Las Vegas casinos, placing him ahead of Star Wars creator George Lucas and former President Donald Trump.⁹

Starting with grit, the desire to improve their status and financial position and a “nothing to lose” mentality, Lansky, Siegel, Buchalter, and Dalitz are just a few examples of the mostly first generation American Jewish organized crime figures, active during the early to mid-20th century.

While the financial success of many Jewish organized crime figures during this period was spectacular, surprisingly few Jewish gangsters passed on their criminal legacy to subsequent generations. American Jewish organized crime of the early to mid-20th century was almost exclusively a single-generation phenomenon and in many respects a story of assimilation and immigrant success, albeit through distasteful, unscrupulous, and all too frequently violent means.

Background: Jewish Presence in America

Jews have been present in the United States since the colonial era; the first confirmed Jewish immigrant community dates to the Dutch merchant ship *Valck* in 1654. America’s Jewish population grew slowly from the first immigrants in the 17th century through the late 1800’s, primarily through immigration to eastern coastal areas.¹⁰ By the end of the 1870s, a census

commissioned by the Board of Delegates of American Israelites estimated the American Jewish population at around 230,000,¹¹ less than 0.5% of the American population of approximately 50,000,000 in 1880.¹² Prior to 1880, the American Jewish community was composed largely of Sephardic Jews (of Iberian descent) and German Jewish immigrants. Both groups kept many of their familial and cultural traditions but were typically well assimilated into American society.¹³ By the 1880's Jewish immigration to America began a dramatic expansion, coincident with increasingly anti-Jewish political policies across Eastern Europe,¹⁴ where pogroms had become common.¹⁵ By 1924 some estimates placed the number of American Jews at 4,500,000,¹⁶ or nearly 4% of the American population.¹⁷ This exponential increase in America's Jewish population over the 1880-1924 period was the result of the mass emigration of Jews out of Eastern Europe largely due to the aforementioned increased anti-Jewish sentiment, poor living conditions,¹⁸ and America's open immigration policy for Europeans.¹⁹

World War I significantly slowed most European (and therefore Jewish) immigration to the United States but the ultimate and lasting cause of reduced Jewish migration to America was a series of anti-immigration legislation passed by Congress in 1917, 1921, and 1924.²⁰ The Immigration Act of 1924 was particularly onerous, placing severe restrictions on arrivals into the United States that effectively forced potential immigrants to prove their "admissibility" under immigration laws. This was a dramatic change from the earlier more lenient policy, where to deny entry, immigration officials had to prove "inadmissibility."²¹ In the years after 1924, Jewish immigration to the United States slowed to about 10,000 per annum²² until after World War II.²³

Background: Immigration 1880-1920, Ethnic Enclaves, and Organized Crime

From 1880-1920, the foreign-born population of America doubled from seven to 14 million; immigrants made up over 13% of the country's total population in 1920.²⁴ American

immigration data from that period indicated that nearly all immigrants were impoverished upon arrival with a high percentage deemed “unskilled.”²⁵ Some had been expelled from their home countries and characterized as “undesirable” prior to their arrival.²⁶ Because of limited resources and familial connections, new arrivals to America typically settled in densely populated urban neighborhoods where they felt a cultural connection, providing them with a sense of community and helping them with finding employment and other essential needs. These immigration patterns created communities, such as New York’s Little Italy and San Francisco’s Chinatown: communities that were distinct from mainstream populations across the United States. In most cases, these neighborhoods served as transitional waystations for immigrants looking to move upward in society. Most immigrants came looking to raise their economic status and sought to move on from these urban slums.²⁷

The 14 million foreign-born immigrants who entered the United States between 1880-1920 birthed 23 million children²⁸ in the years after their migration, creating a massive influx of first-generation Americans. Children of immigrants typically had higher crime rates than their parents which has been attributed to the conflict “first-generation natives” face between their legacy culture and the societies in which they are being raised. Dense population, broken homes, poor socioeconomic standing, mixing of many different ethnicities and cultures, and scarce educational opportunities led to a cultural wild west, contributing to higher crime rates for first generation Americans regardless of culture or nationality.²⁹

One result of the higher crime rates in densely populated, impoverished immigrant communities was the emergence of organized crime syndicates. As defined by the FBI, organized crime is “any group having some manner of a formalized structure and whose primary objective is to obtain money through illegal activities.”³⁰ Ethnic-based criminal organizations

profited off illicit activities including Prohibition-era alcohol trafficking, gambling rings, loan sharking, racketeering, political and legal corruption, extortion, and murder for hire. Organized crime provided a path to move up in “status” and wealth and helped ease assimilation into American culture and society.³¹ Immigrant enclaves in high density urban areas were active breeding grounds for gangs where members of similar social class and environment joined gangs at similar rates, regardless of ethnicity.³² During the 1920s, Chicago saw the emergence of Jewish, Irish, Italian, Black, Mexican, and Chinese crime groups.³³ Organized crime was one way to sustain a living in underprivileged areas, and many of the most successful and powerful members of impoverished immigrant communities in early to mid-20th century America were crime bosses.³⁴ The money and power gained through organized crime provided increased opportunities for those looking to move out of their immigrant enclaves.³⁵

Background: Jewish Organized Crime

While American Jews were significantly involved in organized criminal activity in the early to mid-20th century, they were rarely viewed as violent criminals by the public. It wasn't until over 200 years after the arrival of the *Valck* that the first reports of American Jewish organized crime emerged.³⁶ The murder of Jewish bookmaker Herman Rosenthal in 1912 by a hit squad comprised largely of Jewish gangsters began to change that perception. Rosenthal had announced he was planning to reveal the names of several high-ranking NYPD officers involved in criminal gambling schemes and the subsequent investigation into his murder opened the eyes of the New York public to the existence of Jewish organized crime.³⁷ Jewish gangsters of the early 1900s like Max “Kid Twist” Zweilback, “Big” Jack Zelig, Louis “Lefty” Rosenzweig, and Jacob “Whitey Lewis” Seidenshner were all violent criminals.³⁸ These men were the predecessors of the next, more well known, wave of New York area Jewish gangsters which

included the likes of Arnold Rothstein, Arthur “Dutch Schultz” Flegenheimer, Meyer Lansky, Bugsy Siegel, and Louis “Lepke” Buchalter.

The 18th Amendment’s ratification on January 16, 1919, ushered in the era of “Prohibition,” outlawing the sale of alcohol in the United States. Pre-Prohibition, most “organized” crime consisted of small ethnic gangs in neighborhoods or cities engaging in small street level crime. Serving as a prime example of the “law of unintended consequences,” Prohibition quickly became organized crime’s golden ticket.³⁹ This rise in the influence and profitability of organized crime coincided with the 1880-1924 mass migration of Eastern European Jews to America. Prohibition created conditions that allowed Jewish gangsters to earn never-before imagined profit from the newly illegal alcohol distribution industry. A disproportionate number of Jewish immigrants became involved in various aspects of bootlegging operations, both for its profitability, and possibly due to the Jewish immigrant’s history as alcohol producers and distributors in Eastern Europe.⁴⁰

During the early to mid-20th century, Jews were overrepresented as a percent of their population in organized criminal activity. Nationwide, they accounted for half of the major bootleggers during the Prohibition era from 1919-1933,⁴¹ even though less than 4% of Americans in 1929 were Jewish.⁴² In Detroit, 3.5% of the population was Jewish, yet one of the most prominent gangs was the exceptionally brutal all-Jewish Purple Gang, recruited from the poor children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. The gang reached its peak during Prohibition and was connected to over 500 killings Detroit police, more than believed killed by the infamous Capone Mob.⁴³ In nearby Chicago during the late 1920s, 20% of organized crime bosses were Jewish,⁴⁴ even though Jews made up less than 11% of Chicago’s population in 1927.⁴⁵ While often similar, Jewish gangsters across the country were active in a variety of

criminal activities. Jewish mobsters in Chicago were most heavily involved with gambling and pimping rather than bootlegging, which was the most common illegal activity for Jewish gangsters in most other cities across America.⁴⁶ From New York to Los Angeles, if widespread organized crime occurred in major American cities during this time, it was a safe bet that Jews were involved in some form.⁴⁷

While the unquestionable peak of American Jewish gangsters was during Prohibition,⁴⁸ the reach of Jewish organized crime did not completely falter with the passage of the 21st Amendment and repeal of Prohibition in 1933.⁴⁹ In the late 1930s, Jewish mobsters across the country often led the charge to fight against American Nazi Bund groups and their sympathizers when the legal methods of the Jewish establishment failed.⁵⁰ Following WWII in the late 1940s, Jewish gangsters were actively involved in the “misplacement” of military weapons in American ports meant to be shipped to Arab nations and the safe passage for similar weapons destined for Israel in preparation for the Israeli War of Independence.⁵¹ Jewish gangsters used their criminality in both of these scenarios as a form of geopolitical activism with wide reaching effects on the other side of the world. To many of these men, gangsterism was more than simply self-enrichment.

Despite their disproportionate involvement in American organized criminal activity, individual American Jewish gangsters did not build sustainable criminal enterprises. With few exceptions, Jewish gangsters began to disappear through the 1950's. By the middle of the 20th century, almost all references to American Jewish organized crime in popular culture, political discussions, and newspaper headlines had ceased to exist, and there was little Jewish organized crime beyond the early 1960's.⁵² Few of the prominent American Jewish organized crime figures of the early to mid-20th century had successors of any kind, and because there was seemingly no

familial desire on the part of these individuals to carry on the criminal activities, no legacies endured. Jewish gangsters did not see organized crime as a generational business once they had achieved financial success and social status through their illicit endeavors; gangsterism was not a preferred outcome for their children once it was no longer deemed to be a necessity. Organized crime is often a dangerous occupation filled with fatal surprises; many of the more violent Jewish gangsters died prematurely preventing them from raising children or reaching old age. The legalization of widespread alcohol distribution and sale along with legal casino gambling in Nevada in the 1930's opened pathways for many Jewish gangsters to sustainably legitimize their newfound wealth. Improving economic conditions gave second and third generation American Jewish families the opportunity to leave the densely populated immigrant enclaves that fostered crime and gangsterism.⁵³

The disappearance of American Jewish organized crime of the early to mid-20th century was the result of a lack of familial legacy, premature deaths, the ability to go “legit” through legalized industries, and the improving economic conditions of the post-World War II years that allowed Jewish families to move out of urban slums.

Lack of Familial Legacy: No Successors

Jewish American organized crime was largely a product of the American immigrant experience. Only a handful of Jewish gangsters born after the major Jewish immigration wave of 1880-1924 became well-known organized crime figures. Of the 34 Jewish gangsters mentioned in the book *The Mafia Encyclopedia*, only three were born after 1915.⁵⁴ While not comprehensive, the book profiles many of the most notorious Jewish gangsters and is illustrative of the steep drop in American Jewish gangsterism post the onerous immigration law changes during and after World War I. Few Jewish gangsters joined the “trade” after 1950.⁵⁵ A major

contributing factor to the decline of Jewish gangsterism was the lack of familial legacy. Many Italian organized crime figures kept control of their operations through tight familial relations. At the infamous Mafia “Apalachin Meeting,” held at the country estate of Joe “The Barber” Barbara in 1957 in upstate New York, of the more than 60 organized crime figures attending, during a FBI raid it was found that half had family connections to each other. Although Italian-American organized crime figures may have attempted to steer their children away from gangsterism as did their Jewish counterparts, ultimately, many Italian organized crime networks defaulted to familial succession.⁵⁶

There are many examples of the children of Jewish American gangsters leaving their parents legacy of crime behind them, but far fewer counter examples. An example of the greater opportunities afforded to second generation Jewish Americans born to gangsters can be seen through the case of Meyer Lansky. Born Maier Suchowljansky in 1902, in Grodno, Belarus, Lansky emigrated to New York City’s Lower East Side with his parents when he was nine, growing up alongside other future mobsters Bugsy Siegel and Charles “Lucky” Luciano. At the onset of Prohibition, Lansky quickly became one of the most prolific organized crime figures of his era, eventually owning truck and car rental businesses, luxury hotels, and casinos. He was also involved in bootlegging, gambling, and the murder-for-hire operation, Murder, Inc. Lansky himself preferred to stay out of violent encounters and was more focused on the business side of criminal operations. At the apex of his success, Lansky's hand in illicit activities stretched across America and into Cuba.⁵⁷ Yet Lansky worked to keep his children in the dark about the true source of his wealth. Buddy Lansky, Meyer’s eldest son, only found out about his father’s role in organized crime when he saw a photo of Meyer on the front page of *The New York Sun* when he was 19.⁵⁸ Lansky’s daughter, Sandra, a self-described “Manhattan heiress,” was 14 when she

discovered her dad was a part of the mob after seeing a photo of gangster Willie Moretti dead on the floor in a newspaper article titled "Mob Boss Exterminated in N.J."; Sandra had dined with her father and "Uncle Willie" the night before.⁵⁹ Until that news article, she had thought her dad was a jukebox salesman. Eventually, Sandra came back to her roots and married gangster Vince Lombardo. When her father heard about the arrangement, Lansky asked Lombardo to leave his life of crime for as long as he was in a relationship with Sandra. Lombardo agreed and left organized crime for the rest of his life.⁶⁰ Paul Lansky, Meyer's younger son, attended New York City's elite private school Horace Mann,⁶¹ graduated from West Point, joined the United States Air Force, and eventually became a Lieutenant⁶² serving in Vietnam.⁶³

Longy Zwillman was another powerful Jewish mobster who tried to ensure his family stayed out of his undesirable line of work. Born in 1905 in Newark, New Jersey to Jewish Russian immigrants, throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s he was a major bootlegger and racketeer, building relationships with members of the Jewish and Italian underworld across the country. At one point, Zwillman controlled the majority of bootlegging operations in his home state and was often referred to as the "Al Capone of New Jersey."⁶⁴ Like Lansky, Zwillman wanted his family to have no knowledge or association with the true source of his money and power, and secured jobs in legitimate businesses for his family members.⁶⁵ His daughter, Lynn Kathryn, grew up comfortably before marrying millionaire Warren Tuttle in 1968.⁶⁶

Irving "Waxey Gordon" Wexler was a major Jewish bootlegger in New York, connected to men like Lansky, Zwillman, and Arnold Rothstein. He too shielded his family from his criminal activities to such an extent that even his wife Leah, a rabbi's daughter, was unaware of his true source of income until his trial for income tax evasion in 1933.⁶⁷ Similarly, Jewish gangster John Novick was closely connected with the Genovese crime family of New York. His

daughter Lisa did not know the real source of her father's income until she was an adult, nor did her half-brother Dennis. Neither Lisa nor Dennis had an involvement in organized crime.⁶⁸ Moe Dalitz was a prominent bootlegger in the 1920s.⁶⁹ Dalitz had a son, Andrew, and a daughter, Suzanne; neither were involved with organized crime.⁷⁰ Sol "Red" Steinhardt was a Jewish jewel smuggler and gambler operating in similar circles to Meyer Lansky in New York. Steinhardt's son, Michael, is a retired billionaire hedge fund manager, far from his fedora-wearing father.⁷¹

Nearly every piece of information regarding the families of early to mid-20th century Jewish organized crime figures points to the separation of work and home life. Los Angeles mob man Mickey Cohen, who worked primarily in extortion rackets and gambling,⁷² wrote in his autobiography about a "code of ethics...where one never involved wife or family in work."⁷³ Similar sentiments were echoed by the Geik family, who were not directly involved in organized crime, but whose family relative George Gordon participated in illegal gambling operations and was a close family friend of "Handsome" Charlie Workman, a Jewish member of Murder, Inc. Through the Geik family's experiences with the mob they noticed "there are no second-generation Jewish mobsters. Jews don't make gangsters out of future generations."⁷⁴

While rare, second-generation Jewish gangsters did exist. Myron Sugerman was the son of Barney Sugerman, a New Jersey Jewish gangster associated with Longy Zwillman, Meyer Lansky, and Bugsy Siegel. The younger Sugerman followed in his father's footsteps into a life of crime, although he supplied gambling halls with illegal slot machines rather than working as a hitman. Myron's children reverted to the traditional pattern, with none of them pursuing careers in organized crime; one even became a rabbi.⁷⁵ Arlyne Brickman is a rare example of a female second-generation Jewish gangster. Brickman's father was a racketeer in New York's Lower East Side. As a child she admired the gangsters around her, and idolized Virginia Hill, Bugsy

Siegel's girlfriend who was herself involved in organized crime. Arlyne Brickman was active in the underworld for many years, working with money laundering and narcotics.⁷⁶ Myron Sugerman and Arlyne Brickman are rare exceptions to the larger trend of Jewish gangsterism ending after one generation.

Without a tradition of familial legacies, American Jewish organized crime figures of the early to mid-20th century typically failed to last past one generation. The result of a lack of successors led to Jewish gangsterism being a typically one generation phenomenon, placing an expiry date on the gangsters of the first and only generation.

Premature Death

Often gangsters, especially the more violent ones, died too young to raise children to adulthood; of a published list of 69 Jewish gangsters, nearly 40% were believed to have died before the age of 40.⁷⁷

An example of this pattern of early death was Detroit's Purple Gang, formed in the early 1920s with the merging of two rival predominantly Jewish gangs active in bootlegging and racketeering. By 1928, the Purple Gang was known for its ruthlessness and had reached a peak of 50 members. Over the next ten years many of its leaders were systematically murdered by rival criminal syndicates. In July of 1929, Irving Shapiro of the Purple Gang was shot in the back of the head four times. In October of the same year, Ziggy Selbin, another gang member, was discovered dead on the street at the age of 19. In 1933, Abe Axler, and Eddie Fletcher, two surviving Purple Gang members, were found with a dozen shots apiece in the back of Axler's car. Another gang member, Harry Shorr, "disappeared" in 1935, and in 1937, Harry Millman, one of the last remaining members, was shot to death in a cocktail bar during dinner.⁷⁸

Gangsters did not only die from systematic killing sprees-- many died young from a variety of disparate causes, some mysterious. Jewish gangster Arnold Rothstein, the man who is believed to have conceived the infamous 1919 “Black Sox” scandal along with being embroiled with many bootlegging and gambling operations, died childless in a hotel in November 1928 at the age of 46.⁷⁹ Prolific bootlegger Dutch Schultz died in a restaurant in 1935 at the age of 34.⁸⁰ Perhaps the most famous Jewish gangster of all, hitman turned entertainment mogul Bugsy Siegel was found dead at his home in 1947 in Beverly Hills at the age of 41.⁸¹

Gangsterism is a dangerous occupation and a lifestyle not conducive to raising a family. All the gangsters who died because of gang violence were almost certainly aware of the risks included in their job descriptions. None of these men were able to “teach” future family members their trade to continue the legacy of Jewish organized crime. The fact that many Jewish gangsters died at relatively young ages created obstacles for the emergence of “future” Jewish gangsters.

Legalization of Formerly Illicit Industries

Prohibition lasted nearly 15 years, helping organized crime figures earn unimaginable wealth through their illegal ventures. One Boston Jewish bootlegger, Charles “King” Solomon, who controlled Boston’s illegal alcohol business, was indicted in 1933 for running a \$14 million dollar liquor and smuggling scheme (the equivalent of over \$300 million dollars in 2023.)⁸² When the United States repealed Prohibition with the 21st Amendment on December 5th, 1933, bootleggers were forced to reorganize their enterprises.⁸³ Many Jewish gangsters had amassed significant capital over the Prohibition years and used their newfound wealth to enter into legal ventures. The legalization of formerly illicit industries provided many Jewish gangsters with a clear path to go “legit,” and exit gangsterism.

There are numerous examples of former bootleggers moving into legal alcohol production and distribution. Abe Rosenberg was a former bootlegger who received one of the first legal liquor licenses in New York.⁸⁴ Lewis Rosenstiel was involved in a family business called Schenley Distillers Corporation that had existed prior to Prohibition. Throughout Prohibition, Schenley stayed in business as a licensed medicinal alcohol distributor. However, many thought Schenley's medicinal business was simply a front during the Prohibition years for a very profitable bootlegging business, citing the corporation's repeated purchase of distilleries and warehouses during that time, thereby allowing them to hold considerably more alcohol than a medicinal distributor could ever need. In 1934, as many distilleries were just beginning to transition to legal businesses, Schenley reported over \$40 million of legal alcohol sales (equivalent to nearly \$900 million in 2023 dollars.) Longy Zwillman and Joe Reinfeld, Newark's bootlegging kings, also continued to operate their formerly illicit alcohol distribution business after the repeal of Prohibition. In 1940 the two former bootleggers sold their corporation, Browne Vintners, to a larger Canadian owned alcohol distribution company called Seagrams.⁸⁵ The repeal of Prohibition provided the opportunity for former Jewish bootleggers to own and control legal businesses while still operating the same businesses they had run during the Prohibition years, the production and distribution of alcohol.

By 1910, virtually all forms of gambling were illegal in the United States and remained so through the end of the 1920's.⁸⁶ In 1931, in an attempt to revive the economy during the Great Depression, a bill was passed to allow "wide open" gambling in Nevada, making it the only state with legalized casinos.⁸⁷ In spite of its newfound legality, a host of factors including limited gaming licenses, the Great Depression economy, low population, and the rural nature of the state at the time resulted in Nevada's casinos never taking off through the 1930's.⁸⁸ It was not until the

late 1940's after World War II and the establishment of the first few casino resort-hotels on the Las Vegas Strip that the gambling and entertainment industry in Nevada became a substantial cash flow generating business, foreshadowing the eventual economic explosion of Las Vegas in the decades to come.⁸⁹

Jewish American gangsters were no strangers to running illegal gambling rings. Starting in the mid-1940s many easily transferred their knowledge to running legal casinos in the emerging boomtown of Las Vegas. Bugsy Siegel, Meyer Lansky, and two other Jewish mobsters, Gus Greenbaum and Moe Sedway, purchased the El Cortez Hotel & Casino in 1945.⁹⁰ Soon after, in December 1946, an investment from the same group enabled Bugsy Siegel to open the Flamingo resort casino. Siegel dreamed of creating a spectacle unlike any of the existing casino hotels in Las Vegas at the time. Unfortunately for him, Siegel did not get to see his dream flourish; he was murdered in 1947. Soon after his death, the Flamingo was taken over by Greenbaum, Sedway, and Morris Rosen, all Jewish organized crime figures. With the sale of the Flamingo for \$9 million in 1954 (\$100 million today), the mob made off with a \$3 million profit (\$33 million today).⁹¹ With help from outside investors (including the teamsters union),⁹² the Cleveland Jewish Syndicate, led by Moe Dalitz, Moe Kleinman, Sam Tucker, and Louis Rothkop bought a majority share and control in the Desert Inn, a resort casino that opened in 1950. Through his role at the Desert Inn and other casinos in Las Vegas, reformed gangster Dalitz earned the nickname "The Godfather of Las Vegas" and exerted influence on many new projects in the city through the 1970's.⁹³

While not all Jewish gangsters moved from bootlegging into either legal alcohol distribution or gambling, many of the most well-off Jewish mob men who had the capital to do so allocated at least a portion of their assets into the casino and or entertainment industries.⁹⁴

This allowed them to continue earning strong returns while providing them with a convenient cover for past or possibly current illicit activities, helping to shield them from criminal punishment. The now-legal industries of alcohol sale and distribution along with legalized casino gambling in Nevada provided easy outs for Jewish gangsters to exit illicit businesses.

Improving Economic Conditions: Jewish Migration to Suburbia

With the passing of the Immigration Act of 1924, the large influx of Jewish immigration into America had effectively ceased.⁹⁵ In part by the 1940's, and even more so through the 1950s and 1960s, there were no large groups of young, poor, Jewish immigrant children standing by ready to take on the metaphorical torch of the American Jewish gangster. Starting in the late 1930's, the United States entered a decades-long economic expansion as the country started to curtail the negative effects of the Great Depression and headed into World War II. Using Real GDP, a statistic meant to compare GDP across years by accounting for inflation, in 1938 America's economy reached the pre-stock market crash levels. By the end of World War II in 1945, America's economy had a Real GDP of 2330, over twice of the 1929 value of 1110.⁹⁶ This explosion in economic power allowed many families living in crowded urban centers to uproot themselves and migrate to the suburbs.⁹⁷ Following World War II, President Hoover's claim of a chicken in every pot and car in every garage was finally coming to fruition. Jewish families followed this suburban revolution.

During and after World War II, Jewish families flocked to the suburbs as living outside of cities became affordable for middle-class Americans.⁹⁸ Over 500,000 American Jews served in the military⁹⁹ and upon their return they became eligible for GI benefits helping them to secure low-mortgage rates and pursue the "American Dream." In the past, Jews had often been barred from living in certain areas, but Supreme Court Legislation in 1948 banning "restrictive

residential covenants,” changing social views of Jews, and increasing numbers of communities envisioned and built by Jewish developers opened new, welcoming suburban neighborhoods to American Jews.¹⁰⁰ Jews moved from cities to the suburbs at a higher rate than non-Jewish Americans. Some estimates claimed that one third of all American Jews left cities for suburban areas between 1945 to 1965.¹⁰¹ The massive number of American Jews moving to the suburbs post World War II created a clear generational distinction between these new “suburban Jews” and their parents, the majority of whom had immigrated to America between 1880-1924. An article from 1954 describes this movement of “second-generation American Jews” from cities to suburbs as comparable to their parent’s generation moving from European *shtetls* to America itself.¹⁰²

The rising economic clout and social status achieved by some American Jews during this time severely diminished the pool of future Jewish gangsters. In the early 1960s, 62% of Jews between 18 and 25 attended college or graduate school. This was very different from their immigrant parents who often lived in the slums of urban areas and were poorly educated; only 22% of those student’s parents had attended college. By 1960, 78% of American Jews were deemed “white collar” or “professional” workers, which reduced the allure of the need for gangsterism even among those who still lived in urban neighborhoods.¹⁰³ By the early 1960’s every major American city with a sizable Jewish population experienced meaningful out migration to the suburbs. Metropolitan areas such as Cleveland, New York, Boston, and Chicago all serve as examples of this trend.

A 1980 report from the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland stated, “in the decade of the 1940s the Cleveland Jewish community departed almost en-masse from the central city to become virtually a suburban population.”¹⁰⁴ In 1940, under 100,000 Jews lived in New York

City's suburbs. Only two decades later, in 1960, over 635,000 Jews lived in the nearby suburban hotspots Westchester County, Rockland County, and Nassau County.¹⁰⁵ Into the 1950s, 90,000 Jews lived in the urban Boston neighborhoods of Mattapan, Dorchester, and Roxbury. By 1960, half of them had moved to the suburbs.¹⁰⁶ Only 5% of Chicago's Jewish population lived in the suburbs in 1950. In the early 1960s, this number grew to 40% of Jewish Chicagoans.¹⁰⁷

By the 1960s, nearly all the underlying factors contributing to Jewish American gangsterism (poverty, lack of education, societal discrimination) had ceased to exist. American Jews from all backgrounds had largely evolved from impoverished immigrants into middle class suburbanites. The younger generation growing up in the suburbs had no want, nor need, to live a life of organized crime.

Moving Forward:

By the 1960s, Jewish American gangsters had largely disappeared as a force in the world of American organized crime. A U.S. government report on crime in America published in 1967 stated that members of high profile [organized crime] syndicates were "exclusively Italian." By 1967, as far as the US government was concerned, Jewish American organized crime figures were no more.¹⁰⁸ While no single factor led to the decline of Jewish American gangsters from their position of prominence in the early to mid-20th century, there were numerous factors contributing to their decline. Specifically, a lack of desire on the part of surviving Jewish organized crime figures to have their children follow them into the business, untimely deaths of many of the most violent Jewish gangsters, legalization of formerly illicit industries, and broad-based material improvements in the economic capacity of Jewish Americans in the post WWII years led to more opportunity outside the world of crime. Adding to this was fact that by the 1940s the pool of potential immigrant Jewish gangsters was smaller than it had been in the

preceding decades due to changes in US immigration policies. All of these factors conspired to establish American Jewish gangsterism of the early to mid-20th century as a single generation phenomenon.

Notwithstanding some of the very colorful figures profiled in this paper, most Jewish gangsters of the early to mid-20th century were soldiers who followed the orders of their leaders. For every Meyer Lansky, Bugsy Siegel, and Arnold Rothstein, there were hundreds of Jewish gangsters who largely stayed under the radar, ultimately dissociating themselves from gangsterism and by luck or design never received much publicity.¹⁰⁹

The exodus of American Jews from organized crime started in the 1930's with the repeal of Prohibition. Throughout the decade, Jewish gangsters left illegal activities for various reasons, including fear of law enforcement. Thomas Dewey, future two-time presidential candidate, was a prolific criminal prosecutor in New York City in the 1930s. His achievements included the convictions of prominent Jewish gangsters Irving "Waxey Gordon" Wexler and Murder, Inc. hitmen Lepke Buchalter and Jacob "Gurrah" Shapiro, among others.¹¹⁰ Dewey's prosecution did not shut down organized crime across the country, but for the first time on a public scale, law enforcement was able to get the better of the high-profile mobsters instead of just members of the lower echelon of criminal organizations.¹¹¹

By the 1950's many Jewish mobsters had headed to Las Vegas to operate legal gambling operations. While impossible to equivocally prove, based on the conclusion of the U.S. government and volumes of anecdotal evidence, most American Jewish gangsters had ceased criminal activities by the 1960's. In the 1960's organized crime had largely entered a new frontier, where older forms of gangsterism, such as bootlegging, and to a lesser degree illicit gambling and murder-for-hire operations had become a legacy of the past.

By the 1960's drug production and distribution had become a primary source of income for organized crime, areas where few Jewish gangsters had much historical involvement or experience.¹¹² Organized crime as a whole became tougher to operate with increased scrutiny from the federal government in the 1960s led by attorney general Robert Kennedy, who stressed curtailing organized crime across America.¹¹³ Within a year of Kennedy's appointment, the number of attorneys working on organized crime cases had quadrupled. In 1964, Kennedy's final year as attorney general, the number of organized crime convictions increased twelvefold from 1960.¹¹⁴ This new government focus on organized crime was even enough to wear down Meyer Lansky, who was indicted on tax evasion charges at 70 years old in 1972. Lansky tried to flee from the United States but was rejected asylum on three different continents before eventually succumbing to the U.S. government and was arrested immediately upon landing in Miami.¹¹⁵

Even though the Jewish crime networks of the early to mid-20th century had largely ceased to exist by the 1960's, a second wave of American Jewish organized crime began to emerge in the 1980's. The emergence of this new (much smaller) cohort of American Jewish gangsters coincided with the immigration to America of large numbers of Russian Jews after the fall of the Soviet Union. Between 1967 and 1991, (with the majority coming in the final few years), 500,000 Russian Jews immigrated to the United States. This wave of Jewish migrants were significantly more secular, better educated and had an easier time assimilating into American society than the Jewish immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th century.¹¹⁶ Among the 500,000 immigrants were a number of criminals who went on to form organized crime groups largely based around the South Brooklyn neighborhood of Brighton Beach which soon became nicknamed "Little Odessa."¹¹⁷ Unlike the Jewish gangsters of the early to mid-20th century, many of these new Russian Jewish American mobsters were already criminals upon

entry into the United States.¹¹⁸ In the mid-1990s the FBI estimated that of the Russian mass immigration to the United States, "only" 2,000 of the immigrants were organized crime members¹¹⁹ (not all of whom were Jewish).¹²⁰ For this new generation of Russian Jewish American gangsters, organized crime was not a skill learned as a poor immigrant, but rather something largely exported from their lives as oppressed peoples in the former Soviet Union. While law enforcement has steadily increased its focus on Russian (and Russian Jewish) organized crime,¹²¹ only time will tell if these Russian Jewish mobsters will disappear in a similar manner to the one-generation phenomenon of the early to mid-20th century American Jewish organized crime figures.

American Jewish gangsters of the early to mid-20th century left behind a complicated legacy for the 5.8 million Jews living in the United States today.¹²² Old-time Jewish organized crime figures such as Lansky, Seigel, Dalitz and Buchalter, broke stereotypes and presented America and the world with an image of "tough" Jews willing to fight to climb their way up economically and socially in America, undeterred by their upbringings as impoverished immigrant children and ultimately in some ways achieving the "American Dream." That said, the means which these mobsters used to achieve their success and climb the social ladder were largely abandoned once they had escaped the stress of poverty and immigration.

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