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KILLER JEWS*

by

Rachel Rubin
University of Massachusetts-Boston

Book: *But He Was Good to His Mother: The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters.*

Author: Robert A. Rockaway

Publisher: Gefen Books,

Year: 2000

Book: *The Purple Gang: Organized Crime in Detroit, 1910-1945.*

Author: Paul R. Kaveieff

Publisher: Barricade Books,

Year: 2000

The heyday of the Jewish gangster is long over, but the imagined ethnic mobster has never ceased to fascinate mass American audiences. The past decade or two in particular have seen a fresh burst of popular interest in this shady, colorful figure, largely playing out upon the screen and producing a spate of movies about Jewish gangs – *Billy Bathgate* (1991), *Bugsy* (1991), *Eight Men Out* (1988), *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Lansky* (1999), *Once upon a Time in America* (1984), and *Little Odessa* (1994), among others.

Although audiences' appetites for fictional gangsters have not abated, a glance at historical and journalistic writing spanning the twentieth century about actual Jewish gangsters reveals that the attitude of the Jewish community toward its mobsters has evolved considerably. The first written reactions in the Jewish American press to the activities of Jewish criminals shows pained bewilderment: How could such a thing be reconciled with a moral code that supposedly made violent crime impossible? In addition, many Jews feared that the delinquencies of a few "bad" Jews would

bring shame upon the entire group, and it was a common reaction to ignore or hide the question of Jewish crime. For instance, Detroit Jewish journalist Philip Slomovits acknowledges that the Jewish community was well aware of Jewish gangsters, but didn't want anything about them printed in the newspaper: "'We panicked, ' he admits. 'We worried about what the Gentiles would say and submitted to our fears'" (Rockaway, 58). This fear of making all Jews look bad was not limited to journalistic accounts; more than one academic historian, engaged in researching the first documented accounts of Jewish gangsters in the United States, has reported being asked why he or she must air dirty laundry "in front of" the entire country.

But as the twentieth century moved toward its end, a more distant, and also more appreciative, stance toward Jewish gangsters began to take hold. Rich Cohen's 1999 book *Tough Jews* is exemplary of the new wave of interest on the part of Jews in Jewish gangsters: Bored with his safe and domestic childhood in well-off suburban Chicago, the author seeks in the Jewish gangsters a kind of cultural Viagra. For Cohen, the flinty criminals of his grandfather's generation provide a dramatic antidote both to the [End page 145] pallidness of suburban life and to the behavioral mandates of feminism; rediscovered as ethnic heroes, they stand as a powerful white, middle-class "me too" retort to the general acceptance of "multiculturalism" in the American educational system.

Robert A. Rockaway's *But He Was Good to His Mother*, which claims early on that it will take an anecdotal approach to the story of Jewish gangsters in order to discover "lesser-known" aspects of their worlds, hangs halfway between these two poles of concern. Born in 1939 (which would make him approximately the age of Cohen's parents), Rockaway is not free of the old timidity about representing Jewish gangsters publicly, let alone proudly; his book opens with a brief and apologetic introduction reminiscent of the titlecards required by film industry censor boards in the 1930s, when gangster movies were fantastically popular. These title cards somberly informed audiences that the purpose of the film is not to sensationalize but rather to present a problem that the American public must band together to solve. (See, for instance, the "classic" 1931 gangster movie *The Public Enemy*, which presents such an assurance at the beginning of the movie, and also at the end, thereby bracketing the film with disclaimer.) Along the same lines,

Rockaway promises that "[i]n no way do I seek to glorify the Jewish gangster." That impulse satisfied, he then goes comfortably on, if not to glorify the gangster, then at least to represent, and in turn create, a decided amount of attraction to these figures, an attraction parallel to that of the younger generation of gangster chroniclers exemplified by Cohen.

Rockaway's selective, anecdotal approach serves up the standard gangland slayings, kamikaze bootlegging runs, and bitter ends to the criminal life (including, for instance, a two-page description — oozing bodily fluids and all — of Lepke Buchalter's death in the electric chair). But his rather arch account also dwells upon passionate romances, lavish funerals, and elaborate family dinners. Rockaway's part-admiring, part-farcical focus on the "private" lives and characters of the gangsters results in an odd but marked aura of glamour, as when he writes of the arrest of "Sheeny" Julius Klein in New York City for robbing a woman on Sixth Avenue. The woman refused to press charges; Rockaway concludes, "the lady must have been taken by Klein's boyish looks" instead of arriving at the much more credible conclusion (supported repeatedly by Rockaway's own research) that the victim was afraid of reprisal if she sought prosecution.

Rockaway devotes a chapter to the "good works" of Jewish gangsters, called "Defenders of Their People." This notion of Jewish criminals as protectors of more vulnerable Jews is by now a fairly predictable one. And Rockaway points out that while there is evidence that some gangsters did indeed defend religious Jews as they saw fit, they also made their money, especially when they started out, by shaking down Jewish merchants and pushcart vendors in their neighborhoods. Rockaway concludes that "protecting and helping Jews was fine as long as it did not interfere with business. When the two clashed, making money superceded ethnic loyalties" (254). Thus, Rockaway is fairly clear-eyed about the limitations of gangster benevolence, although he does seem to accept that donating money to a synagogue is proof that the gangsters could sometimes be "good," rather than evidence that synagogues could sometimes be corrupted. **[End page 146]**

Also, there are some problems with representing the Jewish gangsters/defenders as strictly besieged by anti-Semites rather than as participating in turf wars, in which neighborhoods and criminal franchises tended to be marked off and divided up according to

ethnicity. For instance, Rockaway is able to quote, completely without self-consciousness or irony, an aged thug describing a fight that resulted when the "Pollacks" (a derogatory word for Poles) were harassing a Jew nicknamed "Izzy the Chink" (an unspeakably racist term for Chinese); furthermore, the Jews Rockaway quotes usually refer to Italians as "wops" or "dagos." The author himself indulges in a triumphant tone when he writes that Italians were unable to "strut" (222) around Jewish neighborhoods after the Jewish gangsters intervened.

One of the most valuable aspect of Rockaway's larkish account is the attention he pays to the Jewish mob in cities other than New York and Chicago, which generally claim all the attention both in popular cultural representations and in historical accounts. (A notable exception is the St. Valentine's Day Massacre of 1929, in which machine-gun wielding rivals in from Detroit mowed down six Chicago gangsters. This swift but bloody event is referenced in several Hollywood movies, including the Marilyn Monroe comedy *Some Like It Hot*.) Rockaway focuses especially on the notorious Purple Gang, which viciously ruled the underworld of Detroit, where the author was born and raised.

Interestingly, 2000 also saw the publication of a book entirely devoted to the Purples and organized crime in Detroit: Paul Kavieff's less quirky, and more solemn, *The Purple Gang*. Kavieff is less interested in making particular arguments about the Jewishness of the mobsters; his perspective seems to emphasize regionalism rather than ethnicity as such. For instance, he points out that Detroit was the first major American city to go completely "dry" during Prohibition and charts the mob's swift development in Detroit from this unique moment in the city's history. Rockaway, on the other hand, also uses Prohibition as a point of departure, but is much more intent on demonstrating that nationwide, Jews and Gentiles alike took advantage of this ill-considered law to consolidate their illegal activities.

Both Rockaway and Kavieff have sorted through an impressive amount of primary sources, such as interviews, FBI files, court records, and early newspaper accounts. Unfortunately, neither author seems to be equipped or interested in offering a context – in popular culture or in social history – for these remarkable bits of information, so they tend to remain as just that: bits of information. For instance, Rockaway writes in some detail about the death of

Chicago gangster Samuel "Nails" Morton, who worked with an Irish mob and was known as a stylish dresser who loved horseback riding. Rockaway describes Morton's blackly humorous death: he's thrown from a horse and his gang buddies exact revenge by shooting the horse. But Rockaway fails to mention that this scenario is re-created remarkably faithfully in *The Public Enemy*, with the death of the barely fictional gangster Samuel "Nails" Nathan. If Rockaway had attended to this kind of interplay between popular culture and news headlines, he could have attained a much higher level of insight about the complicated and intense relationship between the gangsters and those who loved to watch them. Similarly, the mentions that both authors make of gangster involvement in trade unions, lacking as they do any background in [End page 147] labor history concerning the systematic employment of gangsters by both bosses and union leaders during contentious strikes, are limited to mere illustrations of a peculiarly intangible "old familiar sideline, labor racketeering" (Kavieff, 167).

Rockaway is an academic historian (he's a member of the Department of Jewish History at Tel Aviv University who has published several books on Jewish immigration to the United States), but *He Was Good to His Mother* is not an academic book; it's much more likely to be shelved in the "True Crime" section of a bookstore than in "American History," and it's probably unfair to hold that against it. (Although the author photo on the book's back cover, which pictures Rockaway holding a pistol and grinning, betrays perhaps too much authorial investment in the glamour of his topic). Likewise, *The Purple Gang*, written by a member of Wayne State University's engineering faculty, seems to be more the product of a non-specialist's long-standing fascination than of an analytical impulse. (And the overwhelming number of grammatical, typographical, and stylistic errors that were allowed to stand in the book makes it hard even to read through to the end.) As such, both books serve primarily as current examples of our continued fascination with Jewish gangsters, real and imagined, as we move into the twenty-first century. But for the patient reader, these two books also represent a treasure-trove of material, which, more carefully explicated and contextualized, could reveal an important and compelling chapter of American Jewish history.

ENDNOTE

* Direct correspondence to Professor Rachel Rubin, University of

Massachusetts at Boston, American Studies Program, 100
Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125 (email:
rachel.rubin@umb.edu). **[End page 148]**