

The Jewish Way of Crime

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THE seamier side of modern Jewish life has in recent years become the subject of considerable scholarly interest. We now know more than we ever did before about the Jewish underworld in Germany dating back to the 17th century; the role played by Jewish convicts in the genesis of Australian Jewry; the Jewish criminal element in 18th- and 19th-century England; the activities of Jewish gangsters in America; and Jewish involvement in prostitution ranging over five continents. Historians who once hesitated to venture into these aspects of Jewish history, whether out of delicacy or for fear of fomenting anti-Semitism, are, it seems, now more than compensating for their earlier neglect. If a recent spate of books, articles, and lectures provides any indication of future trends, then studies of this dark side of Jewish life—what Gershom Scholem called the “basement” as distinct from the “salon”—will continue to preoccupy social historians for years to come.

The broad scope of recent research into Jewish criminal behavior is well illustrated in Jenna Weissman Joselit's comprehensive survey, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community 1900-1940*.^{*} Basing herself on extensive research in court records and old newspaper files, Mrs. Joselit paints a convincing picture of an evolving pattern, beginning with crimes typically associated

with poverty and overcrowded ghetto conditions—disorderly conduct, pickpocketing, fencing, gang-related protection rackets, arson, and horse-poisoning; proceeding to better organized and more sophisticated criminal activities undertaken by the children of immigrants such as Prohibition-era bootlegging and racketeering; and culminating in Murder Incorporated, the infamous Italian-Jewish gang that in addition to everything else engaged in money-lending, book-making, and murder for hire.

As might be expected, both the numbers of Jews involved in criminal activities and the special Jewish character of the crimes committed declined over time. Early on, as Mrs. Joselit notes and others have noted before, some disgruntled Jewish immigrants “chose crime as their vehicle of upward mobility.” Through robbery and fencing operations, they created a parasitic counter-industry that lived off the garment trade, skimming its profits for their personal benefit. Others made their living by exploiting Jewish religious practices (the standard history of the kosher-meat industry in New York is aptly entitled *Fraud, Corruption, and Holiness*), or by taking advantage of Jews on the High Holidays. But whatever they did, Jewish criminals did not usually engage in violence; that to them seemed decidedly “un-Jewish.” “Christians commit crimes with their hands,” the sociologist Arthur Ruppin once explained, “the Jews use their reason.”

Reason continued to govern the activities of second-generation Jewish criminals, but their patterns of criminality also reflected their growing assimilation. Like many others in the post-World War I era, they became engaged in boot-

legging. Mrs. Joselit believes that had it not been for Prohibition, Jewish criminality would gradually have disappeared. This seems doubtful, but she does have a point when she compares bootlegging with the rapidly growing movie industry, likewise disproportionately filled with Jews. Taking a page from Irving Howe, she points out that in both cases “a bright young Jew could get in at the start without having to trip over established Gentiles along the way.” Bootlegging also broke down religious and social barriers, and led to more ethnic diversity not just in the underworld but in the country at large. In speakeasies, groups previously separated sat together, the lines between legitimate and illegitimate blurred, and those who went into crime seeking fortunes could hobnob with those whose fortunes dribbled into organized crime's coffers.

From Prohibition, Mrs. Joselit turns her attention to better-known chapters in the history of American Jewish criminal activity: racketeering scandals, the unsavory relationship between organized labor and organized crime, and the oft-told tales of Arnold Rothstein, Louis Lepke, and their ilk. The main characters here may be Jewish, but as Mrs. Joselit realizes, their history has less and less to do with the Jewish community as a whole. Whereas immigrant Jewish criminals had lived and worked almost completely in a Jewish milieu, their offspring moved out, went into partnership with non-Jews, and Americanized; increasingly, they engaged in the same kinds of criminal activities as Gentiles did.

Parallels between the rags-to-riches rise of the East European “Our Gang” and of Jewish immigrants generally spring readily to mind here, and should occasion no surprise. It would be more strange if licit and illicit paths up the ladder should have markedly diverged.

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* Indiana University Press, 224 pp., \$19.95.

What does make Mrs. Joselit's book unusual is her scrupulous attention to another side of the story: the reaction of the established Jewish community to the criminals in its midst.

Shock, embarrassment, anger, and an understandable desire to avoid bad publicity did not prevent the oft-maligned leaders of the Jewish community from taking appropriate and concerted action against lawbreakers. Such action bespoke a staunch commitment to keep American Jewry's house in order, and included the establishment of the first Jewish reformatory in America (the Hawthorne School) and of the Jewish Board of Guardians; the anti-crime measures of the New York Kehillah (an overarching communal body whose career lasted from 1908 to 1922); the campaign to replace ceremonial wine with ritually permissible grape juice during Prohibition; and the vigilant private monitoring of Jewish criminal behavior by Jewish institutions. Even those like Louis Marshall, who blamed Jewish crime not on Jews but on "conditions in this city and this country," still took upon themselves the burden of helping to stamp that crime out.

Mrs. Joselit suggests that this feeling of duty derived from an age-old Diaspora insecurity, a fear that criminals would jeopardize the status of American Jews generally. Given the nativist rhetoric of the day, such fears would hardly have been groundless. But it is also clear that Jewish anti-crime measures stemmed at least in part from a traditional sense of community responsibility, as well as from pride of heritage. "Judaism is morality," one Jewish newspaper insisted, and it encouraged religiously-based programs to wean errant Jews back to the values that the community held dear. In more recent decades this sense of overall responsibility may have declined somewhat, but its influence on an earlier generation cannot be underestimated. Many Jews worked hard to stamp out Jewish crime simply because, as Jews, they felt deeply ashamed of it.

IF JEWISH criminal activity of

every kind covered the community with shame, Jewish involvement in the white-slave trade seemed particularly mortifying. Openly flouting law and tradition, Jews—scions, in some cases, of notable families—played a conspicuous role in the modern history of vice as pimps, prostitutes, and brothelkeepers. For over half a century they actually dominated the international traffic in Jewish women that was centered in Eastern Europe. This is a sad story, filled with grim evidence of social breakdown and exploitation, and for understandable reasons it is not one that most Jewish historians have sought to dwell upon. Now Edward J. Bristow, the author of an earlier book on the history of social-purity movements in Britain, has recounted the story at length in *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight Against White Slavery 1870-1939*.*

Mr. Bristow understands that Jews "were only one of many groups" involved in prostitution: "There were more French prostitutes in Paris than Jewish prostitutes throughout the world." He also appreciates the socioeconomic conditions and the weakening of traditional religious controls that made Jewish prostitution far more of a problem in the modern world than at any earlier time in Jewish history. Unfortunately, he proves not quite so skillful at penetrating the world in which Jewish prostitutes lived. He knows that some observed the Sabbath, holidays, and dietary laws, and that in Argentina they had their own synagogue and benefit organization. But he leaves unanswered such questions as how they reconciled their religion and their life, how they viewed themselves as Jews and as women, and how they maintained their dual existence as part of, yet apart from, the Jewish community in which they were domiciled.

Mr. Bristow devotes about a third of his book to the Jewish fight against white slavery. Parts of this story have been skillfully treated before by Lloyd Gartner and Marion Kaplan, but the focus here is far wider, embracing as it does the entire Jewish world. In Poland, Latin America, and the

United States, for example, Mr. Bristow finds evidence of "well-directed mass [Jewish] working-class support" of anti-prostitution efforts, something not found in the general worldwide anti-slavery movement in which both Jews and non-Jews participated. Those involved in vice were often ostracized; some even met with violence. Of course, there were Jews who refused to confront the subject for fear of drawing further attention to it, and also Jews who insisted dogmatically that society itself had to be transformed before any solution to the problem could be attempted. But considering how many other pressing problems called for solutions, the Jewish battle against vice did attract more support than might have been predicted, both from men and from women.

Mr. Bristow repeatedly emphasizes his view that the "strongest rationale for attempting to combat white slavery" was "self-defense against anti-Semitism." This need not be taken too seriously. Once again, a contemporary historian is displaying too little regard for community responsibility as a critical factor in Jewish behavior. Some Jews really were motivated, just as they claimed, by the desire to "sanctify God's name" through humanitarian action. Others, as Marion Kaplan has shown, used the battle against white slavery as a vehicle for drawing attention to feminist concerns. The fact that anti-Semites, Hitler among them, linked "Jewry and prostitution" may have provoked some self-defense measures, but had far less impact than Mr. Bristow thinks. Hatemongers have regularly invoked against their victims inflammatory charges of sexual turpitude whether they have any substance to them or not. What in the end proves more important about the Jewish fight against prostitution is precisely what is important about the fight against Jewish crime in general: the fact that the organized Jewish community focused on its problems, assumed responsibility for those problems, and worked to bring about effective solutions.

* Schocken, 340 pp., \$21.95.

IN THEIR emphasis on Jewish responses to criminality and vice, Jenna Joselit and Edward Bristow set themselves apart from a host of other recent writers, both popular and scholarly, who have concentrated only on the evildoers—and treated them as if their character traits somehow merited them a place in the gallery of Jewish heroes.

A recent biography of Meyer Lansky, for example, highlights that Mafia mogul's belief that "a Jew should lead a normal life and a proud life . . . I've been ready at any time in my life to defend myself against insults to Jews or to me as a Jew." Susan Berman, daughter of Syndicate leader David Berman, seeks in her memoir, *Easy Street*, to "make the world understand that . . . Davie was a good man who acted out of the most basic desire, to see his family continue and survive." Davie, we are told, was a Jewish role model: "extremely proud of being Jewish. . . . He felt that for a Jewish child to be properly brought up, there must be a synagogue, a rabbi, and a cantor in evidence."

So proud have some become of American Jewry's criminal past that one recent writer in the *Journal of Ethnic Studies* has boasted that "the role of Jews in the beginnings of organized crime in America was as significant as that of the Italians." Lansky's biographer makes a similar claim, hoping that his book will "break the back of the myth that organized crime in America is the sole province of people of Italian origin." The Italian movie director Sergio Leone, in *Once Upon a Time in America*, seems to have taken this theme to its logical conclusion. The protagonist and many of the other characters in this film are supposed to be stereotypical Jews, and they are every bit as unpleasant as their Italian counterparts in crime.

If anyone still had any doubts that "Jews were gangsters too," Albert Fried's *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America* (1980), with its breadth of scope and scholarly pretensions, surely dispels them. But in the process of destroying the myth of Jewish virtue, Mr. Fried does much to holster the new and even more sinister notion that Jews should take pride in their gangsters. Mr. Fried assures us, for example, that it took "qualities of mind and character" to be a Jewish gangster. To succeed "required a good deal of tact, intelligence, command of the economics involved, and, most important, a close kinship with the gang/syndicate leaders, the 'old boy' network."

Mr. Fried does, to be sure, offer an occasional criticism of his subjects, but more often he seems to be gazing up at them in respectful awe. Jewish bootleggers, he exclaims, contributed to "the general resistance to the *Kulturkampf*" which nativists attempted "to impose on city folk, Jews and Catholics alike." Meyer Lansky "always" sought "to maintain the balance between competition and cooperation, between individual greed and the well-being of the community." Bugsy Siegel, the infamous racketeer, played such a "seminal role in the creation of Las Vegas" that he merits a "place of honor in the literature of organized crime, indeed in the history of American culture." "America," Fried concludes, "is embracing Bugsy Siegel's vision; his martyrdom [*sic*] was not in vain."

Bombast of this sort is obviously meant, in part, to pander to a potential Jewish audience, trying to fashion for it folk heroes of the same "gentleman-bandit" type as non-Jews enjoy. Jewish criminals are thus portrayed as being proud of their heritage, big givers to charity, and strong supporters of the state of Israel. They respect

brains, abhor violence, and always love their children.

MORE significantly, works on Jewish criminals and prostitutes seem to reflect a desire to prove Jews "normal," no less criminal or vice-ridden than other peoples. If an earlier generation of writers over-emphasized Jewish virtues, leaving the rest for anti-Semites to tell, today's writers seem eager to go to the other extreme. By revealing the underside of Jewish life they seek to distance themselves from the "chauvinists" of the past, at the same time demonstrating their own "evenhandedness" and lack of bias.

Unfortunately, evenhandedness is not what has resulted. Instead, a kind of Gresham's law has come into play: works on bad Jews crowd out works on good ones. While the study of Jews involved in crime and prostitution marches forward, the study of (for example) the religious life of American Jews remains neglected. Full-scale volumes on Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism in America do not exist; no history of either the American synagogue or the American rabbinate has been written; although Meyer Lansky has been the subject of not one but two biographies, we lack even one good biographical study of some of American Jewry's most noteworthy religious figures, among them Rabbi Isaac Leeser and Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver. The situation in other areas of American Jewish life is just as bad.

This is hardly to say that the more popular subjects are unworthy of attention; certainly there is much to learn from them. But the proliferation of celebratory books about the "basement" does suggest that we are developing a strangely distorted notion of what Jews need to know in order to maintain their heritage intact.