

Jewish Historical Studies
Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

Review:

The Kosher Capones: A History of Chicago's Jewish Gangsters

Robert Rockaway^{1,*}

How to cite: Rockaway, R. 'The Kosher Capones: A History of Chicago's Jewish Gangsters'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2021, 52(1), pp. 312-314.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.026>.

Published: 03 June 2021

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard editorial peer review.

Copyright:

© 2020, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.026>

Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

*Correspondence: rockaway@post.tau.ac.il

¹Tel Aviv University, Israel

The Kosher Capones: A History of Chicago's Jewish Gangsters, Joe Kraus (Ithaca: Cornell University Press/Northern Illinois University Press, 2019), ISBN 978-1-50174-731-1, pp. 240, \$26.95.

Cleveland, Detroit, Newark, and Minneapolis have all merited extensive studies of Jewish gangsters. Chicago, with its much larger Jewish population, has not. Perhaps the dominance, notoriety, and public image of Al Capone has dissuaded potential researchers. Until now. This is not to say that no studies of Chicago's Jewish underworld exist. They do. In 1927, Frederick Thrasher wrote *The Gang*, which includes material showing that, alongside the Polish, Italian, and Irish mobs, up to five per cent of the city's gangs were Jewish. In 1940, Herbert Ausbury published *The Gangs of Chicago: An Informal History of the Chicago Underworld*, in which he discussed Al Capone's friend Jake Guzik, the mob's long-time treasurer. And in 1961, Kenneth Allsop published *The Bootleggers: The Story of Chicago's Prohibition Era*. It discussed Guzik and included brief vignettes covering Maxie Eisen, Hirschey Miller, and Morris Eller. Albert Fried's *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America* (1980) contains some material on Chicago's Jewish mobsters, as does my own study, *But He Was Good to His Mother: The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters* (2000). Finally, there is Alex Garel-Frantzen's slim volume, *Gangsters & Organized Crime in Jewish Chicago* (2013). Its brevity notwithstanding, it presented useful references and a helpful bibliography.

The Kosher Capones: A History of Chicago's Jewish Gangsters, by Joe Kraus, published in 2019, provides us with a much more detailed, expansive, and well-researched account. The book begins in the Prohibition era and carries the story of Chicago's Jewish gangsters into the 1980s, which makes it the most extensive study of the subject now in print. Kraus traces their activities by reconstructing the lives and criminal careers of Benjamin "Zackie the Bookie" Zuckerman, the last of the independent West Side Jewish bosses, and Lennie Patrick who, despite his non-Jewish name, was Jewish and the central figure in Chicago's Jewish organized crime following Zuckerman's death in 1944. Along the way, Kraus writes about Guzik and the Miller brothers, who achieved Jewish communal fame by protecting the Jewish community from the forays of non-Jewish gangs.

Kraus's book draws on numerous archival sources and contemporaneous newspapers and periodicals, both Jewish and non-Jewish (notably the *Chicago Tribune*), interviews and first-hand accounts of the gangsters

by people who knew them. Although these obviously provide background and colour rather than a factual account of the mobsters' activities and crimes, he also introduces material from stories related to him by the gangsters' friends and relatives. Kraus has mined governmental reports and the papers of various commissions, the personnel files of mobsters' attorneys, arrest and trial records, wire service reports, and FBI files. He also had the good fortune of being able to peruse the scrapbook kept by the well connected Chicago mobster Davey Miller. This is something of a rarity. After all, how many mobsters keep scrapbooks detailing their nefarious criminal activities? Miller and his three brothers were prominent in the Jewish Lawndale neighbourhood of Chicago, and maintained ties both to Big Bill Thompson, the city's corrupt mayor, and to Al Capone. In 1924, Dean O'Banion unsuccessfully tried to murder two of the Miller brothers, Max and Davey.

Like earlier accounts, Kraus's book confirms that Jewish gangsterism in Chicago was a one-generation phenomenon, limited primarily to the second-generation children of immigrants. Ultimately, there was no honour in being a Jewish criminal. Jewish gangsters only brought shame on the family and the Jewish community, and the mobsters' children tended, as other studies too have shown, to go to college, and build their reputations and fortunes by entering more conventional professions, becoming doctors, lawyers, accountants, businessmen, and academics.

One question the book does not address is that of why Chicago's Jewish criminals were so marginal. Despite its large Jewish population, Chicago was the only major city that never had a Jewish criminal boss with the power and influence wielded by Meyer Lansky in New York, Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel in Las Vegas, Mickey Cohen in Los Angeles, Charlie "King" Solomon in Boston, or Isidor "Kid Cann" Blumenfeld in Minneapolis. By contrast, Chicago's Jewish crime bosses generally operated only in Jewish neighbourhoods. Perhaps Al Capone and his syndicate's power choked off any Jewish attempts to extend their influence. Nor does the book delve all that deeply into the Jewish mobsters' Jewishness, whether religiously or culturally defined.

These omissions notwithstanding, *The Kosher Capones* is one of the best recent publications on Jewish mobsters, and well worth the read. The author's comprehensive recourse to primary-source material is supplemented by his extensive knowledge of the relevant secondary literature. Most importantly, the book is vividly written, and makes for an enjoyable read. Meant for lay readers rather than a scholarly audience, it

should certainly appeal to readers who live in Chicago, or whose forebears were residents of the city. Nonetheless, scholars of Jewish crime too will benefit from reading it.

Robert Rockaway