

The Notorious Purple Gang: Detroit's All-Jewish Prohibition Era Mob

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During Prohibition (1920-1933), Jewish gangsters became major operatives in the American underworld and played prominent roles in the creation and extension of organized crime in the United States. At the time, Jewish gangs dominated illicit activities in a number of America's largest cities, including Cleveland, Detroit, Minneapolis, Newark, New York, and Philadelphia. One of the more notorious of these all-Jewish mobs was Detroit's Purple Gang. The gang dealt in bootlegging, gambling, extortion, drugs, and murder, and developed a reputation for being more ruthless than Al Capone's mob in Chicago. The Purple's decade-long reign of terror ended when most of the gang's members either went to prison or were murdered by rivals.

After World War I, Jewish gangsters became major operatives in the American underworld and played prominent roles in the creation and extension of organized crime in the United States. During the Prohibition era (1919-1933) 50 percent of the country's leading bootleggers were Jews, and Jewish criminals financed and directed much of the nation's narcotics traffic. Jewish gangs also dominated illicit activities in a number of America's largest cities, including Cleveland, Detroit, Minneapolis, Newark, New York and Philadelphia.¹ Perhaps the most notorious of these all-Jewish mobs was Detroit's Purple Gang.

¹See Mark Haller, "Bootleggers and American Gambling, 1920-1950," in *Gambling in America*, Commission on the Review of National Policy Toward Gambling, Appendix I (Washington, D.C., 1976), p. 106; David Courtwright, Herman Joseph, and Don Des Jarlais, *Addicts Who Survived: An Oral History of Narcotics Use in America, 1923-1965* (Knoxville, 1989), pp. 110, n. 2, 186-188, 199-201; and U.S. Congress, Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, 81st Congress, 1st Session, 1950, Part 2; Stephen Fox, *Blood and Power: Organized Crime in Twentieth Century America* (New York, 1989), pp. 24-35; Albert Fried, *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America* (New York, 1980); Humbert S. Nelli, *The Business of Crime: Italians and Syndicate Crime in the United States* (New York, 1976), pp. 168-169, 172; Jenna Weissman Joselit, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940* (Bloomington, 1983), especially pp. 140-156; and Robert Rockaway, *But He Was Good to His Mother: The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters* (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 7-62. See also Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), files 92-3105, 58-4441, 62-26085, 62-69850, and 62-69870. The FBI files are located at the Federal Bureau of Investigation Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

The gang had its origins in the Jewish section of Detroit's east side. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, this district contained a turbulent and colorful mix of ethnic groups, including Italians, Poles, Germans, Russians, Hungarians, African-Americans and others. In 1920, Detroit's Jewish community numbered 34,727 persons, about 3.5 percent of the city's total population of 993,678. While Jews predominated in their quarter, other immigrants and ethnic groups lived there as well.² One former resident of the old neighborhood joked that it was easy to distinguish the Jewish dwellings from those occupied by non-Jews. "The non-Jews grew flowers in front of their houses," he said. "The Jews grew dirt."³ Variouslly dubbed "New Jerusalem," "Little Jerusalem," and "the Ghetto" by the city's press, the Jewish district abounded with small synagogues and "Hebrew stores of every description: butchers, bakers, clothiers, shoemakers, printing shops and restaurants," as one observer wrote. "A Hebrew might live his lifetime in the quarter and never leave its confines."⁴

Detroit's east side differed significantly from the classic tenement districts of New York's Lower East Side in that it consisted of single and two-family dwellings. Although congestion existed, it never came anywhere near the pushcart-laden streets of New York.⁵ Nevertheless, the east side was one of the least desirable areas of Detroit in which to live. It continually lagged behind the other districts in the number of water pipes laid, sewers installed, streets paved and streetcar lines extended. The district was also more crowded and had higher rents and higher disease and death rates than other parts of the city.⁶

The editor of the *Jewish American*, Detroit's English-Jewish weekly, ruefully admitted that the Jewish quarter contained "tenement houses that are actually unfit to live in: old, decrepit, polluted and infected hovels, where human beings endeavor to exist and where a young generation is reared."⁷ Most Purple Gang members grew up in this environment.

The gang's members were the children of immigrants from eastern Europe, primarily Russia and Poland, who had come to the United States in the great immigra-

²Robert A. Rockaway, *The Jews of Detroit: From the Beginning, 1762-1914* (Detroit, 1986), p. 59; Sidney Bolkosky, *Harmony and Dissonance: Voices of Jewish Detroit, 1914-1967* (Detroit, 1991), p. 19.

³Bolkosky, *Harmony and Dissonance*, p. 59.

⁴Rockaway, *Jews of Detroit*, p. 63.

⁵Rockaway, *Jews of Detroit*, p. 59, 61; Bolokosky, *Harmony and Dissonance*, p. 59.

⁶Rockaway, *Jews of Detroit*, pp. 62-63.

⁷Rockaway, *Jews of Detroit*, p. 63.

tion wave from 1881 to 1914.⁸ Most of the boys had been born in the United States or came to the country as small children. For all intents and purposes, they were second-generation Americans.⁹

Their parents were working class and, strictly speaking, not Orthodox Jews in the exact sense of the term. That is, they did not obey all the religious dictates mandated by Orthodox Judaism.¹⁰ They were what we would call "traditional" Jews; they observed certain religious rituals and traditions such as lighting the Sabbath candles, eating kosher food at home (and often outside the home), attending synagogue on Jewish holidays, and hosting or attending a Passover Seder. Some of the fathers were active members and even officers of synagogues.¹¹

Law enforcement authorities knew this. So, on one particular Day of Atonement, the FBI sent two agents to Congregation B'nai David in hopes that some of the wanted Purple gangsters would show up for services. At the time, the uncle of a leading Purple gangster was president of the congregation. The FBI agents dressed as Hasidic Jews, believing this would allow them to blend in, unnoticed, with the other worshippers. They sat at the rear of the synagogue where they could see who entered and left.

Everything went along smoothly until the recess between the morning and afternoon service. It was a mild autumn day, and the two agents stepped outside along with the other congregants. To the consternation of those around them, the agents lit cigarettes and began to smoke. Because striking a match or lighting a fire is strictly

⁸Over two million Jews immigrated from eastern Europe from 1881 to 1914. For detailed analysis and interpretation of this immigration, see Simon Kuznets, "Immigration of Russian Jews to the United States: Background and Structure," *Perspectives in American History* 9 (1975): 35-124; Liebman Hersch, "International Migration of the Jews," in Imre Ferencezi and Walter F. Wilcox, eds., *International Migrations* (New York, 1931), Vol. 2, pp. 4711-520; Samuel Joseph, *Jewish Immigration to the United States from 1881 to 1910* (New York, 1969); and Lloyd Gartner, "Jewish Migrants in Route from Europe to North America: Traditions and Realities," in Moses Rischin, ed., *The Jews of North America* (Detroit, 1987), pp. 25-43.

⁹This conclusion is based on FBI file 62-2664-1320, which was the Detroit Police Department's 1933 compilation of past and present members of the Purple Gang. The list contained 49 names. I examined the family background of these members, as well as of others who were not on the list.

¹⁰The mobsters' parents were not Orthodox Jews in the strict *Halakhic* [Jewish law] definition of the term. For the truly Orthodox Jew, the Halakhah is an absolute. It is a law of binding imperative which may be violated only under extraordinary circumstances. See Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Be a Jew* (New York, 1972), pp. 29-32, for an exposition of the Halakhah.

¹¹This profile is based on interviews with family members and neighbors of the Purple gangsters. These sources wish to remain anonymous. See also, FBI file 62-26664; Congregation B'nai David, "List of Officers of the Congregation"; Betty Silverfarb, interview by author, Detroit, Mich., 16 September 1999.

forbidden on this holiest day in the Jewish calendar, their cover was completely blown.¹²

As children, the future Purple gangsters lived near each other and attended the same grade school. Few of them ever finished high school. They started off in crime as petty thieves stealing fruit and candy from peddlers and stores; they also stole money when they had the chance. Later they graduated to rolling drunks and waylaying pedestrians late at night. Occasionally they teamed up to shake down Jewish merchants or to take revenge on an enemy.¹³ Gradually the boys, who were too young to serve in World War I, grew up. They stopped preying on storekeepers and vendors and turned their attention to bigger things—the blind pigs [illegal saloons] of the Prohibition era, the gambling joints, and the bawdy houses.

Detroit boomed during Prohibition. By 1929, smuggling, manufacturing and distributing liquor had become Detroit's second largest industry, exceeded in size only by the production of automobiles. Detroit's illegal liquor industry was three times larger than her chemical industry, eight times the size of her stove and heating appliance industry, and ten times the size of her cigar and tobacco industry. Illegal booze employed 50,000 people and grossed over \$300 million a year.¹⁴

In 1923 there were 7,000 blind pigs in the city. By 1925 the number had risen to 15,000; three years later the figure stood at 25,000. The *Detroit News* reported that in some areas of the city "every house is either a bootleg stand or a blind pig." One newspaper investigator found 150 blind pigs on one single block, and more than 500 blind pigs in one twenty-block neighborhood.¹⁵

A. B. Stroup, deputy administrator in charge of Prohibition enforcement in Detroit, complained that "Detroit is the wettest city I have been assigned to. I have worked in several parts of the country and observed conditions carefully, and I can say without hesitation that nowhere else is the law so openly violated as it is here."¹⁶

Supplying the blind pigs with alcoholic beverages became an extremely profitable enterprise. Whiskey smuggled across the Detroit River from Canada was the main source, supplemented by locally produced products. By 1928, five thousand Detroit stills bubbled forth alcohol to slake the city's thirst. Many of these enterprises were

¹²Haskel Adler, interview by author, Detroit, Mich., 3 July 1985.

¹³*Detroit News*, 14 January 1945.

¹⁴Larry Engelmann, *Intemperance: The Lost War Against Liquor* (New York, 1979), p. 125.

¹⁵Engelmann, *Intemperance*, p. 126.

¹⁶Engelmann, *Intemperance*, p. 126.

large-scale operations, but most were small setups in family basements, living rooms, closets and attics.¹⁷

The Prohibition Act of 1920 allowed every American family up to ten gallons of wine annually for religious or “sacramental” purposes. Jews used wine in the synagogue and at home for celebrating the Sabbath and Jewish festivals. According to the law, members of the clergy could request allotments of wine for their congregants. A number of local rabbis exploited the sacramental wine privilege and supplemented their meager incomes by producing wine in their cellars and bathtubs for sale in the marketplace.¹⁸

In Detroit, most branches of the illegal liquor business, from brewing and distilling to rumrunning and blind pig management, were controlled by well-organized underworld gangs. To Detroiters, the best-known gang operating in the city by the mid-1920s was the Purple Gang.

The Purples originated in the 1920s with the merger of two Jewish gangs. The first was called the Oakland Sugar House Gang because their base of operation was a sugar warehouse located on Oakland Street.¹⁹ The original members of the Oakland Sugar House Gang were Charles Leiter, a distillery owner and the mob’s leader, Harry Fleisher, a hefty youngster who started out as a driver for the gang and later became a vicious thug and killer; Henry Shorr, a former potato sacker at a produce market, who was the gang’s financial genius and business head; Irving Milberg, only 17 years old in 1920, but already known to be good with his fists, a club or a gun; Harry Altman, whose arrest sheet included armed robbery, extortion, and murder before he was 21; Harry Keywell, a dark-haired slugger and strong-arm man; and Morris and Phil Raider, two brothers who excelled at larceny and extortion.²⁰ The Sugar House Gang sold corn to moonshiners, provided protection for local gambling establishments, and manufactured alcohol for bootleg liquor.

The second group of east side Jewish criminals was originally formed by Sammy Cohen, a stout gunman and enforcer who was also known as “Sammy Purple.” In the early 1920s the leadership of the gang was assumed by the four Bernstein brothers—Abe, Joe, Isidore, and Ray—who immigrated with their parents to Detroit from New

¹⁷Englemann, *Intemperance*, p. 139.

¹⁸The information about Detroit’s rabbis is based on interviews with long-time Detroit residents. These individuals preferred to remain anonymous.

¹⁹Engelmann, *Intemperance*, p. 143.

²⁰FBI File 62-26664-1320, memo SAC [Special Agent in Charge], New York to Director, FBI, 1 June 1932.

York. At one time or another, the brothers had been arrested for robbery, extortion and murder.²¹

During Prohibition this group, like the Sugar House Gang, turned from shoplifting and extortion to distilling and brewing. To earn extra cash, the gang shook down blind pigs and gambling houses. Eventually, instead of competing, the two groups joined forces under the leadership of the Bernsteins and branched out into the business of importing liquor across the Detroit River from Canada.

Detroit's Canadian border and the existence of Jewish-owned Canadian distilleries, such as those of Sam and Harry Bronfman, offered opportunities to Detroit's Jewish gangsters that rivaled bootlegging operations in Chicago and New York. Instead of transporting the liquor themselves, the Purples arranged for the Jewish-dominated "Little Jewish Navy" gang to bring it across the river for them. The Purple Gang then managed the operation on the Michigan side of the border.²² The Gang's dealings also extended to the sale of stolen diamonds, narcotics and prostitution in Canada.²³

The origin of the gang's name is in dispute. One story has it that the name stemmed from the remark of an east side Jewish shopkeeper who had been victimized more than once by the gang. "They're tainted, those boys," he allegedly told a policeman. "Their characters are off-color. They're purple like the color of bad meat."²⁴ Another account says the nucleus of the gang, while cutting classes at school, spent hours at a cottage near Lake St. Clair. There the boys frolicked about in purple swimming trunks, calling themselves the "Purple Gang." When an older and rougher group took command, they adopted the name the younger boys had chosen. And some say the gang simply took the name of Sam "Sammy Purple" Cohen.²⁵

David Levitt, a neighborhood associate and friend of the boys, has another version. "I was at the warehouse on Oakland Avenue where the boys hung out. It was a sugar warehouse. The boys called themselves the Sugar House Boys. We were sitting around and the boys discussed changing their name. One of the members, whose name was Silverstein, had a purple sweater on. Someone suggested Purple Gang. It stuck."²⁶

²¹FBI File 62-26664-1320. The story of the Bernstein brothers can be found in Paul R. Kaveiff, *The Purple Gang: Organized Crime in Detroit* (New York, 2000).

²²C. H. Gervais, *The Rumrunners: A Prohibition Scrapbook* (Ontario, 1980), p. 133; Engelmann, *Intemperance*, p. 144.

²³Gervais, *Rumrunners*, p. 131.

²⁴*Detroit News*, 28 November 1937; 13 March 1939; 14 March 1939.

²⁵*Detroit News*, 28 November 1937; 13 March 1939; 14 March 1939.

²⁶David Levitt, letter to author, 20 July 1990.

The name meant little in the early years. But as the gang's deeds became more brazen, and their activities in shaking down blind pigs and gambling houses more widespread, the name came to mean terror, violence, slugging and clubbing. Sometimes it meant murder.

Police sources claim that the gang first achieved prominence in 1926 when local gamblers employed them to defend their establishments against pilfering by a gang of invaders from St. Louis known as "Egan's Rats."²⁷ The Rats were a powerful St. Louis mob that had been founded at the turn of the century by Jellyroll Egan. He specialized in hiring out his army of thugs to anti-union businessmen as strikebreakers. Prohibition gave the gang a boost and they expanded their activities. Under the leadership of a hoodlum named Dinty Colbeck, the Rats engaged in safecracking and jewelry heists and supplied men to other criminal gangs that needed out-of-town talent.²⁸

The Purples had imported several Rats to help them in their war against Detroit's Italian mobs. A number of Rats then double-crossed the Purples and began operating on their own. These men were blamed for the March 1926 kidnapping of Meyer "Fish" Bloomfield, a croupier at the Grand River Athletic Club, a well-known gambling place. Bloomfield's employer and associates paid a \$50,000 ransom for his release.²⁹ The "snatching" of Bloomfield was the first in a series of kidnappings of rich gamblers for ransom. A debate raged as to whether the Purples played a defensive or an offensive role in the crimes.³⁰

A few defectors from the St. Louis gang then merged with the Detroiters. This combination was further strengthened by the addition of a number of tough and brutal men from New York. Two of the most ruthless New Yorkers were Abe Axler and Eddie Fletcher. Both men grew up in New York and came to Detroit in 1923, while in their early twenties. In Detroit, they became inseparable pals and partners, and hit men [professional killers] for the gang.

One observer described them as "sawed-off Napoleons," with "dark, furtive, beady eyes and abnormal ears, Axler's protruding and overgrown by nature, and Fletcher's flattened and hammered close to his head by the punches of too many pugilists during his early boxing career."³¹ Axler was never a boxer. His nose had not been knocked askew as Fletcher's was, and his large ears had never been "cauliflowerized." But his

²⁷*Detroit Times*, 27 November 1933; *Detroit News*, 14 January 1945.

²⁸Carl Sifakis, *The Mafia Encyclopedia* (New York, 1987), p. 117.

²⁹*Detroit Times*, 27 November 1933; *Detroit News*, 14 January 1945.

³⁰The Purples became so adept at kidnapping that the FBI suspected them of involvement in the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby in 1932. See FBI file 62-26664.

³¹*Detroit Times*, 27 November 1937.

face was the more sinister of the two. He had an aquiline nose, high cheek bones, deep shadows under his small eyes, sunken cheeks and a thin, tight mouth. By repute, he was a more vicious killer and rougher fighter than Fletcher. Axler was dour, moody and quick on the trigger of a machine gun. Fletcher had been a second-rate boxer who became a fifth-rate fight manager and, ultimately, a first-rate gunman. Both men were “larceny-minded schemers and killers, with an abundance of what police and newspapermen call ‘crazy nerve,’ ” wrote one journalist.³²

By 1927 the Purple Gang had grown to between forty and fifty members and felt strong enough to move against their competitors and those who had betrayed them. In March 1927, Fletcher, Axler and other Purples rented a suite in the Milaflores Apartments on East Alexandrine Avenue and invited three visiting St. Louis gangsters—Frank Wright, Reuben Cohen and Joseph Bloom—to a meeting. The St. Louis trio planned to set up their own bootlegging operation in Detroit. When they entered the flat, Fletcher and Axler opened up with machine guns. The three callers were dead before they hit the floor. The police later dug 110 bullets out of the floors and walls.³³ Crime historians refer to this incident as Detroit’s first machine gun execution and the event which introduced machine guns into Detroit gangster warfare.³⁴

Axler and Fletcher, along with a colleague and former Egan Rat, Fred “Killer” Burke, were arrested as suspects in the killing. Police grilled them for hours without results and, in the end, were forced to let them go. Despite their release, Axler and Fletcher’s activities earned them the odious distinction of being named Detroit’s Public Enemies No. 1 and 2, respectively.³⁵

By 1928, the Purple Gang was at its peak. It dominated the Motor City’s rackets and acquired a reputation for ruthlessness and violence that matched Chicago’s Capone organization. The consensus was that the Purples were the toughest Jewish mob in the nation. Jazz musician Milton “Mezz” Mezzrow, who played in Detroit and Chicago, knew many of the Purples. He claimed that they were “a hard lot of guys, so tough they made Capone’s playmates look like a kindergarten class.”³⁶

The major source of the gang’s income was bootlegging. The Purples controlled the liquor traffic from Canada, as well as a number of blind pigs and gambling houses. They operated them outright or forced them to pay “protection” money to stay in

³²*Detroit Times*, 27 November 1937.

³³*Detroit Times*, 27 November 1937; Richard Bak, “Dusting Off the Purple Gang,” *Detroit Monthly* (December 1992), p. 70.

³⁴*Detroit Times*, 27 November 1937.

³⁵*Detroit Times*, 27 November 1937.

³⁶Milton “Mezz” Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues* (New York, 1946), p. 92.

business. The gang also organized a phony Detroit business, the Art Novelty Company, to facilitate the interstate shipment of their Canadian Whiskey. Liquor conveyed to Detroit from Canada was brought to the company's building where it was packaged under false labels and then shipped by train or truck to other cities.³⁷ In addition, gang members arranged for Detroit automobile dealers to transmit containers of whiskey in new cars to dropoff points in Ohio.³⁸

For several years, the Purples ran the lucrative business of supplying Canadian whiskey to Al Capone. The hijacking of a shipment of Purple Gang whiskey (Old Log Cabin) by the Bugs Moran Gang of Chicago led to the St. Valentine's Day Massacre of seven Moran gangsters in 1929.³⁹ It was rumored, but never proven, that two Purple gangsters, Harry and Phil Keywell, acted as lookouts for the perpetrators.⁴⁰

In order to earn additional money, the Purples branched out into other rackets during the late 1920s. They hijacked prizefight films and forced movie theaters to show them for higher fees. Detroit theater owners, distrustful of the local authorities and fearing for their lives, sent a confidential letter to J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI pleading for help. "We think that this is an outrage and you should investigate this matter right now and not let these gangsters make thousands every year at this racket and pay no income tax and get away with it," they wrote. "Can't we have some protection please?" The owners requested anonymity "because we don't want no stink bombs put in our theaters or else the back blown up, or worse."⁴¹

The Purples also dealt in gambling and narcotics and defrauded insurance companies by staging fake accidents. They kidnapped people and accepted contracts for killing the enemies of various hoodlums who did not want to commit the murder themselves.⁴² Detroit police credit the Purple Gang with over 500 killings, more than

³⁷Engelmann, *Intemperance*, p. 144.

³⁸Pat Martin, interviewed by author, Detroit, Mich., 31 January 2000. Ms. Martin worked as a bookkeeper for a number of Chevrolet dealerships during Prohibition. She knew about the arrangement her employers had with the Purple Gang.

³⁹Robert Schoenberg, *Mr. Capone* (New York, 1992), pp. 207-229; John Kobler, *The Life and World of Al Capone* (New York 1971), pp. 253-255.

⁴⁰Kobler, *Life and World*, pp. 228-229; FBI File 62-39128, serials 137-207, section 4; *Detroit News*, 16 February 1929, 18 February 1929; Laurence Bergreen, *Capone: The Man and the Era* (New York, 1994), pp. 307-308.

⁴¹FBI File 62-296321-11, Letter to J. Edgar Hoover. 25 June 1936.

⁴²Engelmann, *Intemperance*, p. 144.

the Capone mob. This caused Herbert Ausbury, a historian of American crime, to call the gang “the most efficiently organized gang of killers in the United States.”⁴³

In 1932, the Detroit Police department sent the FBI resumes of fifty Purple Gang members. A few examples from this roster illustrate the criminal credentials of these men:⁴⁴

Abe Kaminsky’s arrest record included armed robbery, murder, extortion, and assault with intent to kill. At the time of the report, he was serving time in prison for extortion.

Harry Levine served terms in Sing Sing Prison for burglary and in Leavenworth Penitentiary for violating the Prohibition Law. His record listed arrests for armed robbery, grand larceny, and murder.

Sam Axler served a term in Sing Sing Prison for grand larceny, and had been arrested for armed robbery, shooting a police officer, and murder.

Harry Millman, 22 years old in 1932, had already been arrested for violation of the Prohibition Law, carrying concealed weapons, armed robbery, extortion, kidnapping, hijacking, and murder.

Edward Shaw committed crimes wherever he went. He had been arrested in upstate New York on a narcotics charge, in Los Angeles for a burglary, in New York City for a homicide, and in his hometown, Detroit, for armed robbery. At the time of the report, he was wanted for murder.

During 1927, the gang extorted thousands of dollars in protection money from Detroit cleaners and dyers. The laundry business attracted many Detroit Jews because it seemed a logical adjunct to tailoring and because of the ease with which a family could maintain the business. By the 1920s Jews owned most of Detroit’s dry-cleaning establishments. They became the prime targets of the Jewish gang.⁴⁵

Most of the laundries paid their monthly or weekly “dues” without protest. “It was not worth getting beaten up or losing your life or your business,” one owner recalled. “So we paid the collector when he came.”⁴⁶ Recalcitrant owners were subjected to fires, dynamitings, stench bombings, thefts, beatings and kidnappings. This so-called “Cleaners and Dyers War” lasted for two years, and at least two cleaners, Sam Sigman and Sam Polakoff, were murdered in cold blood.⁴⁷ The police finally stopped the war and arrested twelve Purples, among them the Bernstein brothers, Abe Axler, Eddie

⁴³*Detroit Times*, 27 November 1933.

⁴⁴The names were taken from FBI file 62-23190-178.

⁴⁵Bolkosky, *Harmony and Dissonance*, p. 143.

⁴⁶Bolkosky, *Harmony and Dissonance*, p. 143.

⁴⁷*Detroit News*, 14 January 1945.

Fletcher, Harry Keywell and Irving Milberg. They were charged with conspiring to extort money from wholesale cleaners and dyers. The trial lasted for weeks, but ended with the men being acquitted.⁴⁸

The gang extorted money from other legitimate businesses as well. One terrified businessman wrote to J. Edgar Hoover describing his fear and predicament: "Several years ago this mob came to my office and announced that they would take charge and if I didn't like it my body would be found floating in the Detroit River." As a result, "I was compelled to let these parasites run my business and take the biggest cut of the profits or face death." He explained that he "dare not give you my name," and asked Hoover to "do everything in your power to rid Detroit of this menace and put these rats where they really belong."⁴⁹

After the Cleaners and Dyers War, the Purple's interest in extortion declined. They continued to operate, however, as bootleggers, rumrunners, hijackers, smugglers, betting parlor operators and dope peddlers.

The Purple's reign ended because the police moved against them when gang members got careless and left behind too much evidence of their crimes, and because the rival Sicilian mob, tired of competing with the Purples, decided to eliminate them. One by one, the Purples were murdered until most of them were either dead or afraid to remain in Detroit. The Sicilians moved so secretly that neither the Purples nor the public knew what was happening.⁵⁰

In July 1929, Prohibition agents brought liquor violation charges against four members of the gang and made the charges stick. Eddie Fletcher, Abe Axler, Harry Sutton, and Irving Milberg were sentenced to twenty-two months in Leavenworth penitentiary and fined \$5,000 each.⁵¹

Two months later, Phil Keywell shot and killed a young boy he thought was spying on the gang. David Levitt was there at the time and remembers what happened.

My brother Nate Levitt owned a warehouse and liquor cutting headquarters in the rear of Jaslove's butcher shop on Henry and Hastings. One of our employees, a man by the name of Eddie Keller, went up to the office to tell them he saw a black boy looking under the stable door. The boy lost his ball: it rolled under the door.

Phil Keywell and my brother Nate found the boy in front of a candy store between Henry and Medbury on Hastings Street. The kid was confused and couldn't answer their questions. Phil shot the boy.

⁴⁸*Detroit News*, 14 January 1945, 13 September 1928.

⁴⁹FBI file 62-29632-3, Letter to Mr. Hoover, 4 August 1934.

⁵⁰Engelmann, *Intemperance*, pp. 144-145.

⁵¹*Detroit News*, 25 July 1929.

However, the police did not want Nate, as he would have been charged because he was with Phil. The police wanted to get Morris Raider, who was the sidekick of Philly Keywell.

Morris Raider had an alibi which he did not use. And both men were sentenced to life at Jackson.

The boy should not have died. The police let him bleed to death instead of calling for an ambulance. They were taking reports."⁵²

In November 1929, Morris Raider was sentenced to twelve-to-fifteen years in Jackson State Prison for the shooting. In October 1930, Philip Keywell was sentenced to Jackson Prison for life for this same killing. He served 32 years and was paroled in 1962.⁵³

In 1931, Ray Bernstein, Irving Milberg, and Harry Keywell were sentenced to life imprisonment for cold-bloodedly killing three rival gangsters in what reporters called the Collingwood Manor Massacre.⁵⁴ Bernstein suffered a stroke in prison and was released on mercy parole in 1964. He died in 1966. Harry Keywell was paroled in 1966. And in 1936, Harry Fleisher was tried in federal court for violation of the internal revenue law. He was charged with part ownership of a \$100,000 six-thousand-gallon still. Fleisher and his brother Sam were sentenced to serve eight years in the Federal Penitentiary at Leavenworth.⁵⁵

Harry was released in 1944. In December 1945, he was convicted for the armed robbery of an Oakland County gambling spot and received a sentence of 25 to 50 years. He was released again from prison in 1965 at the age of 62. He never went back to prison again and died a free man in 1978.⁵⁶

Louis Fleisher, Harry's other brother, was arrested in 1938. A longtime member of the Purples, Louis' record of arrests included bootlegging, assault, carrying concealed weapons, arson, robbery and murder. Louis specialized in "muscle tactics" and intimidation in Detroit's meat-cutting and packing industries and during the Cleaners and Dyers War.⁵⁷

Some Detroiters remember Louis as an open-handed, big-hearted, boisterous, fun-loving, friendly guy. Others remember him as a nut. They recall how Louis enjoyed

⁵²Levitt, letter to author.

⁵³*Detroit News*, 20 September 1930, 28 November 1937, 22 October 1965.

⁵⁴Gervais, *Rumrunners*, pp. 133–142; *Detroit News*, 11 November 1931, 12 December 1931, 28 November 1937.

⁵⁵*Detroit News*, 14 January 1945.

⁵⁶*Detroit News*, 22 October 1965; Kavieff, *The Purple Gang*, p. 204.

⁵⁷FBI files 7-142-2, 62-29632, 58-1573-1; *Detroit Times*, 19 March 1937; *Detroit Free Press*, 3 April 1964.

aiming his moving car at people he knew walking across Twelfth Street, where the Purples' favorite restaurants were located. He thought it was great fun to chase them to the curb and then down the sidewalk. One acquaintance claimed he would "always get out of a joint when Lou walked in. You never knew what would happen." Another friend felt differently. "I was always glad to see Lou walk in a place," he said. "Things livened up every place he went."⁵⁸

After searching for him for over a year in connection with robbery and arson, Federal agents located Louis in his car outside an apartment at Highland and Second Avenue. Louis' wife Nellie fled, throwing away a pistol as she ran. Agents seized her before she got too far. Inside Fleisher's apartment, agents found an arsenal consisting of submachine guns, revolvers with silencers, brass knuckles, a dozen tear gas shells, and a thousand rounds of ammunition. Fleisher was sentenced to 30 years at Alcatraz. His wife got ten years.⁵⁹

Louis was paroled in 1957, after serving nineteen years, but was jailed again in 1958 for violating parole after Detroit police arrested him for attempted arson. Louis had been caught on the roof of the Dorsey Cleaners on East Seven Mile Road. A hole had been bored in the roof and a can of gasoline was next to him. Fleisher told police he was in the area of the shop "walking my dog." No dog was found.⁶⁰

Fleisher pleaded guilty to arson and was sentenced to five years in prison. By playing with matches on the cleaning plant roof, Louis had violated his federal parole. He served the rest of his federal term, eleven years, in Leavenworth and the Milan, Michigan prison, with his Detroit sentence running concurrently. He died of a heart attack in the Michigan State Prison at Jackson in 1964.⁶¹

Remaining leaders of the gang were systematically and mysteriously executed. In July 1929, Irving Shapiro, who had been a strong-arm man for the gang, was taken for a ride and slain, his head shattered by four bullets fired at close range from behind.

In October 1929, Ziggy Selbin, a Purple Gang enforcer, was cornered in a doorway on Twelfth Street and shot to death. Few persons mourned his death because Selbin was wild, unpredictable, and totally unprincipled. Born in Detroit in 1910, his father was a deli owner who also dabbled in petty crime. By the time Ziggy was a teenager he had committed several murders and was doing considerable free-lance work. Once Selbin got into an argument with a drinking companion who refused to surrender a ring Selbin

⁵⁸*Detroit Free Press*, 3 April 1964.

⁵⁹FBI file 58-1573-1.

⁶⁰*Detroit Times*, 7 November 1958.

⁶¹*Detroit Free Press*, 3 April 1964.

admired. Ziggy solved the stalemate by cutting off the man's finger.⁶² Despite his good work for the gang, the hard-to-control Selbin had become an embarrassment. The Purples felt they had no choice but to eliminate him.⁶³

In November 1933, the bodies of Abe Axler and Eddie Fletcher were found, side by side and holding hands, in the back seat of Axler's car on an isolated road in Oakland County. Each man had been shot in the face a dozen times.⁶⁴

Henry Shorr, for many years the gang's brains, disappeared in December 1935 after meeting Harry Fleisher in a Twelfth Street delicatessen. Fleisher's automobile was later found with bloodstains on the cushions, and Shorr was never seen again. The police concluded that Shorr had been taken for a ride. His body was never found, and Fleisher had an airtight alibi.⁶⁵

In November 1937, Harry Millman, the gang's last surviving torpedo, was gunned down in the cocktail bar of Boesky's delicatessen on Hazelwood and Twelfth Street where he had gone for dinner.⁶⁶ More hooligan than hoodlum, Millman had swaggered through the Detroit underworld with a chip on his shoulder, rye whiskey on his breath, and an eagerness to be a tough guy. Millman had a quick, vicious temper and was prone to erratic and violent behavior, especially when drunk. An example of the consequences of his uncontrollable attitude occurred at a nightclub one evening in 1935. Harry Kasser was there and described what happened.

Millman and Joe Bommarito [a local Italian mobster] hated each other. They couldn't be together for five minutes without a fight breaking out. It happened to be in a club one night when Bommarito and some other Italians was [sic] there. Millman walks in and sees Bommarito. Millman walks over to Bommarito's table and says, "Something stinks here real bad, like a polecat." Bommarito jumps up, grabs Millman, and they have a go at each other. They tore place up and both of them were a mess. They took Bommarito to the hospital. Millman's clothes were torn and he was covered with blood. But he cleaned himself up and stayed for a drink.⁶⁷

⁶²Bak, "Dusting Off the Purple Gang," p. 68.

⁶³Bak, "Dusting Off the Purple Gang," p. 68; *Detroit News*, 28 November 1937.

⁶⁴*Detroit Times*, 27 November 1933.

⁶⁵*Detroit News*, 14 January 1945.

⁶⁶*Detroit News*, 25 November 1937, 28 November 1937.

⁶⁷Harry Kasser, interview by author, Los Angeles, California, 17 August 1986. For another description of this incident, see KaviEFF, *The Purple Gang*, p. 182.

Although considered the clown of the gang, Millman was serious enough to try and carry on the Purples' extortion rackets. However, his post-Prohibition career consisted mostly of shaking down whorehouses.

An earlier attempt had been made on Millman's life that summer when someone placed a bomb under the hood of his car, set to go off as soon as he stepped on the starter. Only Millman sent Willie Holmes, the doorman at a local nightclub, to pick up his car for him. The hapless Willie started the engine and was blown to pieces.⁶⁸

From then on, Millman lived on borrowed time. Detective-sergeant Harold Branton predicted Millman's death. "His number is up and it's only a question of time. He has kept himself on the streets with his gun and his fists. He is going to die one of these days and die violently."⁶⁹ Those out to get Millman tried again, but this time they brought in outside help. It was long rumored that Harry Strauss and Happy Maione, two Brooklyn-based professional killers, had been hired to do the job.⁷⁰ According to witnesses, two armed men strode into the crowded restaurant as Millman sat at the bar. They pumped nine bullets into Millman, killed Harry Gross, a Millman friend, and wounded four innocent diners in the process. The killers then calmly sauntered out and disappeared down a dark street. No one ever saw them again.⁷¹ Millman's death signaled the end of the Purple Gang as a force in organized crime in Detroit.

No one has ever been convicted for killing the Purples. But law enforcement officials agree on who benefited the most from their elimination: the Mafia family headed by Joseph Zerilli.⁷²

Zerilli had come to the United States from Sicily at the age of seventeen. Starting out as a common laborer, he eventually built a criminal operation that made a profit of \$150 million a year from loansharking, extortion, narcotics, bookmaking, and labor racketeering. Posing as a respectable baker-businessman, Zerilli lived in a \$500,000 home located on a twenty-acre estate in the exclusive suburb of Grosse Point Park. During his lifetime he was convicted only twice: for speeding and for carrying concealed weapons.⁷³

⁶⁸*Detroit News*, 25 November 1937.

⁶⁹*Detroit News*, 25 November 1937.

⁷⁰Harry "Pittsburgh Phil" Strauss and Harry "Happy" Maione were members of an infamous Brooklyn based Jewish and Italian murder-for-hire gang called Murder, Inc. For material on this gang and its members, see Alan Block, *East Side–West Side: Organizing Crime in New York, 1930–1950* (New Brunswick, 1983); and Burton Turkus and Sid Feder, *Murder, Inc.* (New York, 1979 [1951]).

⁷¹*Detroit News*, 25 November 1937; Turkus and Feder, *Murder, Inc.*, p. 9.

⁷²Engelmann, *Intemperance*, pp. 145–147; Nelli, *The Business of Crime*, p. 170.

⁷³Carl Sifakis, *The Mafia Encyclopedia* (New York, 1999), pp. 351–352.

Throughout the 1920s the Purples coexisted, albeit uneasily, with the Italians. The Purples even imported two Italian brothers from St. Louis, Yonnie and Peter Licavoli, to gun for them, and joined Zerilli in a number of criminal ventures. The Licavolis later left the Purples and became their rivals in bootlegging and other rackets.⁷⁴

As long as the Purples remained powerful, Detroit Mafia families made do with the territories ceded to them by the Jewish mob. After the murder convictions of the Keywells, Bernstein, Milberg and Raider in 1930 and 1931, the Italians moved against them. Detroit turned into a battle zone. Elsie Prosky was a schoolgirl in Detroit at the time. "I lived in the middle of the city just off Woodward Avenue, where much of the fighting went on," she says. "I recall many times dodging into a store on my way home from school to avoid gunshots."⁷⁵

As long as the gangsters killed only each other, the authorities displayed a singular lack of interest in the goings-on. The police commissioner explained that "so long as they confine their shootings to their own kind there will be no police drive or any increase in the squad assigned to such cases."⁷⁶ After an especially wild eleven-day shooting spree in July of 1930, during which twelve hoodlums were gunned down on city streets, Mayor Charles Bowles remarked that "it is just as well to let these gangsters kill each other off, if they are so minded. You know the scientists employ one set of parasites to destroy another. May not that be the plan of providence in these killings among the bandits?"⁷⁷ Bowles' nonchalant attitude toward the violence outraged Detroit's respectable citizens. On July 22, 1930, they deposed the mayor in a recall election.⁷⁸

By the end of Prohibition in 1933, the Purples had been elbowed aside by the Sicilians, spearheaded by Joseph Zerilli. The war ended and the city quieted down. Zerilli remained the crime boss of Detroit until his death in 1977.⁷⁹

Despite their apparent power and reputation for ruthlessness, the Purples were, in truth, a local gang that never made it big; a neighborhood mob that, for all its swagger and braggadocio, remained small-time. When once asked how he rated the Purples,

⁷⁴Gervais, *Rumrunners*, pp. 143–144.

⁷⁵Elsie Proskie, interview by author, Tel-Aviv, Israel, 1 January 1991.

⁷⁶Melvin Holli, ed., *Detroit* (Detroit, 1976), p. 126; Bak, "Dusting Off the Purple Gang," p. 109.

⁷⁷Bak, "Dusting Off the Purple Gang," p. 109.

⁷⁸Bak, "Dusting Off the Purple Gang," p. 109; Robert Conot, *American Odyssey* (New York, 1974), pp. 343–344.

⁷⁹Nelli, *Business of Crime*, p. 170.

Meyer Lansky, a major figure in American organized crime, replied, "They were nothing."⁸⁰

In looking at the careers of the Purple Gang, and other Jewish mobs of that era, one question continually presents itself: What motivated these men to engage in criminal activity? Poverty? Perhaps. But the Purple gangsters were no more deprived than their peers who grew up on Detroit's east side. These men were not products of crushing poverty, broken homes, or widespread economic despair. Most of them had been raised in lower middle class households where the father had a steady, if not well-paying, job.

Antisemitism? Possibly, because the Detroit of the 1920s was not always a pleasant place for Jews to live. From 1920 to 1922, Henry Ford vilified Jews in the pages of his *Dearborn Independent* newspaper and in pamphlets entitled "The International Jew." Ford required his automobile dealers to give a pamphlet to everyone who purchased one of his cars, and millions of Americans bought Fords. And Ford allowed the Ku Klux Klan and the antisemitic Black Legion to proliferate at his Detroit plants.⁸¹

Detroit's Jews also encountered economic discrimination in commercial banks, industrial corporations, public utilities, such as the Detroit Edison company, insurance companies, and widespread social discrimination in local clubs, like the Detroit Athletic Club.⁸²

Perhaps some of these tough young Detroit Jews were angry enough at this situation to strike back at society through crime. More likely, however, these men selected careers in crime because they wanted money, power, recognition, and status, and they wanted it fast. Crime offered them a quick way to realize their dreams. Joe Bernstein owned a handsome Tudor-style home and spent over \$100,000 furnishing it. Other Purples wore expensive clothes, drove fancy cars, squired teenage showgirls around the city's countless speakeasies and night clubs, and engaged in all-night orgies at Oakland County roadhouses or downtown opium dens. Harry Millman, in particular, was known for his almost inhuman consumption of booze, cocaine, heroin, and women.

Furthermore, crime was exciting, certainly more glamorous than the tedium of studying or the drudgery of working long hours in a shop or factory. An attorney for Jewish mobsters once explained: "They were uneducated men, but they wanted the good life. There was little else they could do to get it."⁸³ A hard-boiled crime reporter

⁸⁰Meyer Lansky, telephone interview, 27 August 1980.

⁸¹See Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York, 1994), pp. 78-127.

⁸²Bolkosky, *Harmony and Dissonance*, pp. 78-82. A similar situation existed for Jews in other parts of the United States.

⁸³Lester Schaffer, interview by author, Philadelphia, Penn., 14 August 1991.

was more blunt: "They were uneducated. Crime was the easy way to make a buck. That's all it was."⁸⁴

Since the Purples had been raised in traditional Jewish homes, had grown up in a Jewish neighborhood, spoke and understood Yiddish, and associated primarily with other Jews, did the Jewish religion have any discernible impact on them? Although some of the men continued to have dinner with their parents on Friday night and even attended the synagogue on the high holy days, little else in their lives reflected any imprint from Judaism or Jewish tradition.⁸⁵ The few who did maintain some connection with things Jewish were able to compartmentalize their lives. That is, they could separate what they did to earn a living—their "business" lives—from the way they behaved in their personal lives, even if the result was inconsistent behavior between the two.⁸⁶

Because the Purples were flamboyant and well-known in the city's night spots, and because many of them liked to dress well, be seen in public, and live in elegant homes, a romantic aura surrounded the gang which distinguished it from other Detroit mobs. Hollywood believed in this image and hoped to capitalize on it. In 1960, Allied Artists produced "The Purple Gang," starring Barry Sullivan as the heroic, honest detective, and Robert Blake as the Purple's brutal, neurotic leader.⁸⁷ The film was a "B" movie that flopped at the box office.

In the final analysis, Meyer Lansky's estimation of the Purples may have been right.

⁸⁴Herb Brin, interview by author, Los Angeles, Calif., 27 August 1991.

⁸⁵This conclusion is based on interviews with former mobsters and their families.

⁸⁶For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Laura M. Cray, Asya Paza, Donald M. Wolfe, "Patterns of Life Structure and Variability in Self," *Human Relations* 41 (November 1988): 783–804.

⁸⁷*Daily Variety* (Hollywood), 8 January 1960; *The Hollywood Reporter*, 8 January 1960.