Meyer Lansky - Boardwalk Empire

Meyer Lansky, according to people who knew him, built his "business" on his word. A small man, born in Grodna (then Russia, now Belarus), his family was Jewish.

No one is sure about his exact birth date, but it is historically given as July 4, 1902. As a child, he studied Hebrew and attended Synagogue services with his grandparents.

The many pogroms, carried out against Russian Jews, made life difficult for Meyer (who was born Maier [Majer] Suchowljanski) and his family. His grandparents emigrated to Israel, while Meyer's immediate family sailed to America in March of 1911. Meyer was nine at the time.

Things did not go well for the Lansky family.

After living in Brooklyn for two years, they were forced to move - for financial reasons - to New York City's Lower East Side. It was a place where half-a-million people crowded together in tenements.

Much of a young boy's life took place on the city streets.

A good student, Meyer was still influenced by activities around him - especially gambling. In a formative life incident, he once lost a bet (which he thought would never happen), causing his family to have a cold dinner:

> *One afternoon before Shabbat, his mother had given him a nickel to pay the corner baker to cook the Shabbat cholent. Meyer felt confident enough to try his luck at the crap game instead. He lost his five cents with the first roll.*
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> *He learned an important lesson that he ruminated on after services that Saturday afternoon as his family very quietly ate their cold meal. He learned it was a sucker's bet to roll the dice. It was a sure bet to control the game.*
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> *The lesson did him well his whole life. He never gambled again. He controlled the game.* ("In Search of Meyer," by Jerry Klinger, published in the February 2009 edition of "The Jewish Magazine.")

Lansky had a remarkable gift for numbers. By sixteen, he had already left school. Even though he was small, he was tough. Before long, he met Lucky Luciano and Bugsy Siegel. Luciano was impressed by the young lad. They soon became friends.

When Prohibition began, Lansky met Arnold Rothstein. Working for (and trusted by) Rothstein, he learned much about playing a role in Rothstein's organization.

With his skill at numbers, and his desire to avoid the vengence-filled life of most gangsters, Lansky fine-tuned his quiet, soft-spoken manner. Saratoga, in upstate New York, was one of his favorite business spots. Betting on horses was a much-loved past time of wealthy people at Saratoga, and Lansky did well as he separated those visitors from their money.

Meyer married and had a son, Buddy. Unfortunately, the child was born with cerebral palsy. His wife blamed her husband's criminal ways for their child's physical challenges.

Despite all his efforts to find a cure for his son, no amount of money would resolve the problem.

This clip, from a documentary on Meyer Lansky, incorporates historic film footage from his various interviews.

See, also:

Meyer Lansky - Friend of Lucky Luciano

Meyer Lansky - It's Just Business

Meyer Lansky - Chairman of the Board

Credits:

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