

Tempo



The Berman family



Davie Berman



Gladys Berman

A daughter digs up her Mafia roots

In 1977, journalist Susan Berman found the full story of her father, Las Vegas casino and hotel operator Davie Berman. The man who had been "Dad" to her had been a notorious mobster. His friends had been his partners in crime, bootlegging, racketeering, robbing banks, and included the likes of Bugsy Siegel, Meyer Lansky, and members of the notorious Syndicate and Murder, Inc. This is the first in a series from the book "Easy Street," which details a daughter's search for her roots.

By Susan Berman

IT WAS 1957 and I was 12. They said it was the largest funeral Las Vegas had ever seen. There were thousands of mourners. Pallbearers were men that I had known: Gus Greenbaum, who would later be decapitated in Phoenix; Willie "Icepick" Alderman, who would die after serving time in Terminal Island on a mob extortion rap; Joe Rosenberg, one of my father's partners in the Flamingo and Riviera hotels who was known as his mouthpiece; Nick the Greek, famed oddsmaker.

Squat Jewish men surrounded Uncle Chickie and me at the funeral, saying, "We don't expect trouble." My father, Davie Berman, 54, lay in an open casket while the rabbi intoned, "It is a sad day for all of Las Vegas. Davie Berman, one of our original pioneers, who made this city bloom, is dead." Mourners kept grabbing me and kissing me, and one man I didn't know said, "Susie, your dad was the greatest gangster that ever lived. You can hold your head up high."

Another man said to me, "Susie, your dad was a standup guy." I had never heard the word gangster before in connection with my father. I didn't know that "standup guy" was a term used for someone with a strong commitment to the Underworld who wouldn't crack under pressure.

He was just my father to me, but to the world he was Davie Berman, one of the founders of the Syndicate, a trusted partner and confidant of Meyer Lansky, Frank Costello, and Bugsy Siegel. He was the man who one crime reporter said "was so tough he could kill a man with one hand tied behind his back."

He was the immigrant Russian rabbi's son who began building his own gambling empire in the Midwest when he was just 16 and went on to become a bootlegger and bank robber whose face appeared on dozens of wanted posters. He was the brazen kid who engineered one of the first kidnappings of a bootlegger for ransom, escaped death in a Central Park shootout in New York, and was called by a detective "the toughest Jew I ever met" on the front page of the New York Times. He was the Mob visionary who helped convince his Eastern associates that there was money to be made in that honky-tonk town called Las Vegas and went on to



The family memoir of Susan Berman [above] includes Chickie Berman, her uncle [above left], Gladys Berman, her mother, and Davie Berman, her father, shown together in Sloppy Joe's Bar, Havana, 1940. Davie Berman [center left], the Syndicate kingpin, was known as "the goodwill ambassador of gambling" in Las Vegas. Gladys Berman [lower left], the glamorous dancer who swept Davie Berman off his feet, never recovered from her depression.

forge a gambling silver mine out of a desert full of sagebrush.

Later, a friend of the family said to me, "Susie, only you are left now. Maybe someday you can make the world understand that your father Davie was a good man who acted out of the most basic desire, to see his family continue and survive."

I intend to try.

I REMEMBER HIM AS always working, spending a minimum of 14 hours a day at his hotels. I'd watch him from my place on the sidelines, the casino patrician, strolling so elegantly up and down the pit, glancing at the gaming tables and issuing commands in a low staccato soft voice that knew no hesitation. Entertainers like Jack Benny and Jimmy Durante, producer Harry Cohn, businessmen, foreign dignitaries, and Las Vegas' highest rollers made up his daily retinue. He was called the ambassador of gambling.

My father was a legendary gangster in his youth and a forceful and feared head of the Syndicate by the time I knew him. He lived in the midst of a world that was dangerous, violent, and severe.

But he fabricated a childhood for me that seemed all-American and completely normal, disguising his real career as carefully as he managed it—with no false moves. He told his friends that I must never know the secrets of his past because the knowledge

might destroy me. He was determined that the sins of the father would never be visited upon his child. I assumed, if I thought about it at all, that he had no other life before the one we shared in Las Vegas.

At home he laid down rules that made perfect sense. I never knew they were designed to keep me safe in his world of hidden terror. He gave me the same advice countless fathers gave their children. Yet many of his lessons were an unusual twist on the "Do as I say, not as I do" rule.

He gave me a silver dollar for my school savings account because "banks are for saving money," yet he had spent his youth robbing banks. He and my mother had no checking account because "everyone knows us here; we just use cash." [Mob members preferred to keep cash boxes, and had few visible assets.] "Don't touch Sheriff Schuman's gun in the casino. Guns are bad things," he told me, yet he had hardly ever been without one before he moved to Las Vegas.

WE HAD kidnap drills. "If anyone asks if you're Davie Berman's daughter, say no, run, scream, yell, use whatever you have to to get away." He had been a kidnaper.

We carried no house key because "somebody is always home." [Mob members never carried keys; if they were kidnapped, the kidnapers could get to their

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Mobster's daughter reflects on a man she thought she knew

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families.) Several men lived with us who my father said were "friends." I never knew they were bodyguards.

Personally austere, my father neither gambled nor drank. In his youth he had been a high-stakes gambler and a bootlegger.

He didn't like to stay in small rooms for a long time, he once explained, because he felt confined. He had served 7½ years in Sing Sing, 4 in solitary confinement.

Our late-night jaunts to Los Angeles were always called vacations. He'd wake me and tell me to get dressed. We'd drive to McCarran Field and fly to L.A. I'd be kept at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel for a few days with a couple of his male friends.

Those vacations were flights to freedom when there was Mob unrest and I was endangered. He always told me to "follow the rules," yet he had broken more than he could ever count.

In 1944, the year before I was born, my father made the biggest move of his career. He came to Las Vegas to help run it for Meyer Lansky, Frank Costello, Lucky Luciano, and Joe Adonis. After a dangerous and lengthy career that spanned every Mob venture in the '20s, '30s, and '40s, he was rewarded with a big piece of the action in what he envisioned as a jackpot town.

My father came home every night to read me a story before I went to sleep. He told me I would be the first Berman to go to college. He started the first synagogue in Las Vegas.

As a first-generation Las Vegas, I had known only the life he had chosen to give me. The background sounds of my childhood were slot machines crunching, dice clicking, the songs of Sophie Tucker and the Andrews Sisters, and the carping of an ever-present hotel page at both the Flamingo and Riviera hotels: "Davie Berman, calling Davie Berman." To this day the desert air invigorates and exhilarates me like nothing else, and hotel coffee shops and floor shows give me a tranquillizing sense of security.

I ONLY KNEW that my father owned hotels in Las Vegas. My mother had gotten sick when I was very young, and he had elected to raise me with him in his hotels, answering well-meaning relatives who offered to take me by saying, "She's a part of me and I want her here." He captivated me at an early age, fascinated me, stimulated me, and I was with him daily. I associated my father with activity and my mother with sadness and stillness from the beginning.

Most days after school the driver would take me to the Flamingo Hotel to be with my father.

I'd run into the casino and head for the pit, ducking under the burgundy velvet cord, yelling, "Daddy, Daddy, I'm here." Gamblers would look annoyed at hearing a child's shrill voice in this most grownup of places, but once they saw whose child it was, they acted delighted.

My father was always dressed in a stylish suit. He had a ruby mezuzah that hung on a gold chain from his pocket and he always smelled of French cologne.

His eyes twinkling, he'd reach down and throw me into the air, catching me and hugging me on the way down. Then he'd lead me off to the counting room in back of the pit where we'd get down to the serious business of homework. The counting room always smelled awful to me. Odors of old cigaret butts and paper money clung to the walls. He'd clear off a space and we'd begin.

He concentrated on improving my math, never my best subject. He hit on an inventive solution—he started a coin collection for me. He bought me the coin books and had hotel sheriff

Dave Schuman bring in handfuls of change from the slots for me to sort, catalog, and add up. It was a lesson in casino economics.

Everybody at the hotel was part of my extended family—the entertainers: Howard Hughes, who hung around in frayed short-sleeved shirts and tennis shoes; the hotel doctor, Dr. Fred Cherry, who saw me through the childhood diseases; and the men who lavished presents on me, gamblers who wanted to curry favor with my father.

The top stars of the day played our hotel—there were the Ritz Brothers, the Andrews Sisters, Tony Martin singing "Lullaby of Broadway," Frankie Laine singing "Cry of the Wild Goose," Kay Starr appearing in a white dress with appliqued red dice and singing "Wheel of Fortune" or "Lonesome Gal in Town," Jack Benny, Jimmy Durante, Sophie Tucker, Zeppo Marx (who lived in one of the bungalows in back), Spike Jones, Ken Murray and the Blackouts, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Peggy Lee, Xavier Cugat, Ben Blue, the Mills Brothers, the Ink Spots, and many more. My father was especially close to Jack Benny and Jimmy Durante; he liked to trade one-liners with them.

HE SEEMED the most normal of fathers to me. The only thing I didn't like about him was his thinning hair. I preferred a full head of hair and constantly complained to my father about his bald spot. "I'll work on that, Susie," he'd say.

I only knew my father's partners from a child's perspective, the same way I knew my father. There was Willie Alderman, called in his youth "Icepick Willie" because he allegedly killed people with an icepick. Willie was my favorite, a big, lumpy, silent man who greeted me every day with, "How ya doing, Susie?" He was always right by my father's side.

There was Gus Greenbaum, a junkie and alleged killer. Gus was an older dark-skinned man who smoked cigars and growled gruffly. He never paid any attention to me and never smiled. Once I kicked him as hard as I could in the ankle just to prove I existed. He said, "Davie, the kid takes after you." I asked my father if he had kicked "big mean men," too, but my father said no, and not to kick Gus again.

I didn't know what really went on in the counting room when I wasn't doing my homework there. Three times a day—3 p.m., midnight, 3 a.m.—my father took off the money boxes and counted the take in that room. Then he made sure the Eastern group got its due. At the Flamingo, as in his downtown hotels, he was the pit boss in charge of all the gambling in the casino.

Privately my father said heavy gambling was "for suckers" and that he didn't mind making money off strangers but he didn't want to make money from friends. He hadn't done more than make a minor bet on a horse race in 10 years by the time he came to Las Vegas. When he brought friends in from Minneapolis or Sioux City on a junket, he was known to keep tabs on how much they lost. At the end of their stay, he would hand them a hotel check for the amount of their losses and say, "Spend it on your family."

My mother had loved Las Vegas, too—at first. She was 26 and I was a 2-month-old baby when she brought me with her on the train from Minneapolis. She got off the train and handed me to him with a look of shock on her face. She uttered the words any Midwestern wife might: "Where is the town?" staring around at nothing but miles of sagebrush, cactus, and carcasses of prairie dogs.

The "town" was only firmly established in my father's mind. With the greatest passion, he told



The Berman family in 1953: Living on the enchanted edge of a dark reality.

her it was going to be the jewel of the desert.

While my father worked his 14 hours a day, my mother tried to keep herself occupied with me at home. But very soon the violence of my father's life began to destroy her. He told her nothing, but she perceived enough to know that her husband and child were not safe. She knew that we were living on the enchanted edge of a dark reality. She was not allowed to make friends freely, her movements were guarded. The two or three wives of my father's partners that she had known from before were as isolated in their homes as she was in hers. She had no interest in gambling or drinking, frequent escapes for Mob wives.

THEN SEVERAL catastrophic events occurred. First Ben Siegel was killed, and death threats were made to friends of my father's. She never knew if my father might be threatened or killed. She could trust no one; she'd thought respectability in Las Vegas would bring safety. It didn't.

The constant family peril was too over-

powering for her, silence sucked her in. Her daily life was constricted by caution and fear. The stress of living in a violent, unpredictable world broke her. She became obsessed with getting out of Las Vegas, away from the Mob. My father pretended to us that the dark side of his life didn't exist. If he had any fear, he never showed it.

My mother didn't see his increasing power as success. She perceived only the ominous atmosphere of the town and everything about it was frightening. My father worked all day and night; she was left alone to worry and go mad.

She was always terrified that I would find out who my father really was.

In 1950-51, the Kefauver Senate Crime Investigating Committee convened and turned its spotlight on the national gambling syndicate. My father was to be called along with all his associates. My mother was distraught that I would hear about it, and although I was only 6, would somehow understand what their lives were about. My father tried every maneuver he

could to avoid being called, and finally three of his friends convinced the committee that he knew only what they did and that my mother's precarious state of health would deteriorate drastically if he were called. He was never asked to testify.

MY MOTHER remained fanatical about keeping me away from anything that might mention my father—newspapers, detective magazines, books. Once I bought my father two detective magazines for his birthday. He always read them when he wasn't reading histories of the Jews. She admonished me severely and told me never to purchase such a magazine or look at one again.

Another time there was a "Talk of the Town" column in the New Yorker that said the town was run by former bootleggers. My parents took no chances. My father had all the issues on sale bought out so that there would be no chance I could see it and make a connection.

My mother had no support systems, no security, no assurance that tomorrow would come for any of us. Many of the other wives were made of harsher stuff. But my tortured, sensitive mother could find no release.

When my mother had her first breakdown, I was 3. My father took her back home to Minneapolis and up to the Rochester Clinic for shock treatments, an indiscriminately prescribed treatment in those days. Sometimes my mother and I went to Minneapolis together. But always on the return trip to Las Vegas she would sit glum and silent. She began to go away by herself for long periods of time; then she was institutionalized for depression.

SHE WAS obsessed with my safety. One day when I was 8, I was dragged into a car near Fifth Street School by a middle-aged man. He threw me into the back with a bunch of comic books, and I knew he was no friend. He had only driven a block when I hit him in the face and jumped out of the car yelling all the way. Two policemen heard me and brought me home. It was a blow my mother's friends say she never recovered from. The man was never heard from again and never caught. There was no evidence it was a Mob kidnaping, it could have been a crank or a pervert. But it happened to be a time of Mob tension. My mother was convinced that I had just escaped death. She screamed and cried in her bedroom for three weeks after that and my father had to keep coming home from the hotel.

The worst had happened; her private world had been violated. I was her total identity, her only reason for living, and now she had proof that something could happen to me.

On my 12th birthday, my father gave me a party at the Riviera Hotel. He had invited 10 of my girlfriends from owners' families and Liberace sang "Happy Birthday." My father had a special cake made up, all chocolate, and bought out the hotel gift shop for me. He sat in a booth behind our table to watch the whole extravaganza with pride.

One month later he was dead.

Two years later, my mother, still suffering terribly from severe bouts of depression, died from an overdose of sleeping pills in Los Angeles.

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Monday In Tempo: The making of a gangster.