

The Literary Club

ABNER, or

He Was So Good To His Mother

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Part 1

Avraham and Anna Zwillman arrived from Skoponiak, Russia in 1898. Their first home here was a tenement in the large public market area of the Newark ghetto, a crowded, noisy, fetid place where pushcarts lined the streets from dawn to sunset and peddlers sold everything from fruit and vegetables to pencils, yard-goods, soap and eyeglasses; and where Avraham eked out a subsistence-level income peddling live chickens.

By 1918, the Zwillmans had seven children, ages 1 to 17. With one exception, they all led remarkably unremarkable lives.

The exception was their third child and second son, Abner, born in 1904. At every age, Abner was bigger, stronger, faster, and smarter than all of his contemporaries. In 1918, at age 14, he was over 6' 2" tall, 200 pounds of muscle and a fearless fighter in a neighborhood gang with members four and five years older, and the owner of a cafe in the market hired him as a bouncer and to run errands. He also picked up cash doing odd jobs for the pimps, prostitutes and gamblers who hung out there.

The whole neighborhood knew "*der langer*," Yiddish for "the big guy." When thugs from the nearby Irish 1st Ward raided the market, roughing up the peddlers, overturning their pushcarts and generally creating panic, the call would go out to get "*der langer*." He and his pals would rush to the scene, isolate the biggest, toughest-looking invader, and Abner would pummel him into senselessness. That stopped the incursions until another gang, who hadn't heard about him, or didn't believe what they heard, showed up

However, later that year, his father died. He was only in the eighth grade, but with older siblings incapable of taking charge, he quit school and his job, rented a horse and wagon and peddled produce to housewives in affluent neighborhoods.

The business was profitable from the start, and as his customer list and their demands for more goods and services grew, and he hired 3rd Ward pals to take over his routes.

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By 1930, he was a wealthy 26 year-old, wealthy enough to buy homes for his mother and siblings in a small enclave adjacent to Weequahic Park, where a few wealthier families lived in well-kept single-family homes.

His own home and office were in a large suite in the then first-class Riviera Hotel, near downtown Newark.

By the 1950's, Abner was a multi-millionaire, involved in many ventures. His core business was coin-operated machines, with more than 1,000 cigarette vending machines dispensing over 650,000 packs a month, and laundry machines, juke boxes and other coin-operated equipment producing comparable results.

He was handsome man, with dark eyes and wavy black hair. Despite his dominating size – 7 inches taller than the then average male – he was charming, polite and soft-spoken, always well-groomed and impeccably dressed wherever he went. But he always shunned the limelight.

Corny as it sounds, he never forgot his roots, and always made generous contributions to local churches, synagogues and social service agencies, especially those that helped underprivileged children. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, he distributed turkeys and food baskets to agencies in poor neighborhoods. He sponsored elaborate benefit events for local orphanages; and every year, before the Jewish high holidays, he paid the bill for the Newark Hebrew Orphanage to buy new clothes and shoes for all of the children.

Perhaps his philanthropy was repaid in the form of Father John Delaney, a young priest he met at the height of the Depression in a church basement, serving hot meals to more hungry poor than the kitchen could handle, and running out of money. Abner handed him \$1,000 in cash on the spot, and sent him \$1,000 every week thereafter until the kitchen closed seven years later.

It became a close friendship, lasting until Abner's death. At Father Delaney's urging, Abner hired tutors from Seton Hall College to improve his speaking skills and introduce him to

the classics, music and fine arts, and he became an avid reader, supporter of the arts and opera buff. Father Delaney became a regular guest at Abner's home on Thanksgiving, Christmas and other occasions, and at his summer home at the Jersey shore. Abner bought Father Delaney a rural New Jersey farm where he ran a summer camp for inner city youngsters.

In 1939, Abner married a young divorcee. She had one son, who he treated as his own, and in 1944, she gave birth to Abner's only child, a daughter.

Sometime after midnight on February 26, 1959, Abner went to the basement of his English Tudor mansion in an exclusive neighborhood of West Orange, wound an electric cord around his neck, looped the other end around a ceiling joist, and took his own life.

Part 2

In 2009, under the Freedom of Information Act, an FBI file with roughly 750-pages of heavily redacted material dating back to 1938 became public, revealing information about a person alternately identified as Eli Cohen, A. Long, George Long, George Slavin, A. Spitzel, Abe Spitzel, Al Williams, Abe Zwillman, Abraham Zwillman, Abner Zwillman and the name by which he was best known, Longie Zwillman – “Longie”, the anglicization of “*der langer*”.

Longie Zwillman's career in crime began when he was 14, the day he started working at the saloon. Most of his errands were to pick up envelopes stuffed with cash and betting slips from street agents for a racketeer who was running a numbers operation from the saloon.

He quickly learned the essentials of the numbers racket, and soon after he started peddling produce, his largest source of revenue was his own numbers bank, with 3rd Ward buddies working as street agents, and numbers frequently rigged to minimize winners.

In 1920, when prohibition started, he muscled his way into bootlegging, convincing one competitor to get out of the business by shooting him in the testicles, and another by bludgeoning him with a blackjack.

In 1923, Longie and Joe Reinfeld, another Newark bootlegger, became partners. Reinfeld was smuggling good Seagram's liquor by freighter from Montreal to a point off Sandy Hook, where small boats picked it up late at night. Under Longie's hands-on supervision, enough

competitors were murdered or maimed, or mysteriously disappeared, to eliminate most of the competition, and goons riding shotgun in their surplus World War I armored delivery trucks killed or wounded enough would-be hi-jackers to discourage them as well.

It was probably the most profitable bootleg operation in the country, selling nearly 40% of all liquor imported during Prohibition at \$30 per bottle, for which they paid \$2 per bottle. But their merchandise was the real thing in an era of often poisonous bathtub gin and backwoods distillery counterfeits. Their estimated income from 1928 to 1933 was \$80 million. All tax-free.

In 1927, New York gambling was controlled by Frank Costello, Lucky Luciano, Meyer Lansky, Joe Adonis and Bugsy Siegel. Thomas E. Dewey, who later lost the 1948 presidential election to Harry Truman, the overwhelming underdog of everyone except the voters, but in 1927 was a New York special prosecutor assigned to organized crime, was putting heavy pressure on the mobs and starting to get convictions, and Costello, *et al*, were looking for sites in New Jersey, where Dewey could not follow them. By then, Longie, age 23, owned most of the North Jersey police, prosecutors, judges and politicians, and he was not about to cede any of his territory to anyone.

After several threatening exchanges, an intermediary arranged a meeting. It was held in the back room of a Cliffside, New Jersey restaurant. The New Yorkers came with their goons. Longie came alone. They weren't total strangers, but had no previous close relationships. After a few tense minutes, Luciano held out his hand and said "Good to see you, Abe." Only Longie's family and closest friends called him "Abe", short for his father's name, Avraham.

For Longie, it was a peace signal.

They shook hands, dismissed the goons and shared good Italian wine while Longie convinced them that cooperation was more profitable and safer than crime wars. Then he laid out a map of roadhouses he owned along the Jersey Palisades that would make good casinos. In less than three hours, they shook hands on an equal six-way partnership, which came to be known as the "Big Six." Nothing was put in writing, but there was a clear understanding as to operations that would be run exclusively by the partnership and those each partner could run on his own. For Longie, it was vending machines.

Most of the New York gaming operations were moved to New Jersey, and over the years, the Big Six added luxury hotels, casinos, prostitution and other operations from Atlantic City to Miami and Las Vegas to Havana.

When Prohibition ended in 1933, the Zwillman-Reinfeld partnership ended amicably. Reinfeld decided he could run legitimate liquor distributorships and still make lots of money, and did so for many years.

Perhaps still haunted by the poverty of his youth, Longie clung to his vast criminal empire, which by then included vehicle parking systems, hotels, night clubs and restaurants. Most were legitimate businesses, but they all spilled out tons of untaxed cash, much of it literally counted by weight.

He also got into the unions, installing henchmen as union bosses and getting large kick-backs from employers in exchange for sweetheart contracts with long terms, no-strike provisions and other management-favored goodies.

He was not only the brains behind the creation of the Big Six. It was his idea to outsource murder, a profession that attracted unreliable, unpredictable and socially demented operatives more wisely dealt with as contractors outside the Big Six organization. A by-product of that decision was the creation of "Murder, Inc." a lovely group of the area's finest professional killers.

He also orchestrated one of the more legendary gangland slayings, the murder of Arthur C. Flegenheimer, alias Dutch Schultz, a murderous maverick who controlled all crime in the Bronx. In a deadly game of "gotcha", Dewey was closing in on Schultz at the same time that Schultz was setting up Dewey's murder, and wanted the Big Six to help. Luciano knew that he was Dewey's next target after Schulz, and favored helping Schultz. Longie pointed out that killing Dewey would get nationwide publicity and bring the wrath of the entire law enforcement world, including the FBI, down on all of them. Since Dewey was after Schultz, wasting him would be a favor for Dewey, attract far less attention and keep the feds away. And, oh, by the way, it would open up the Bronx as another market.

At about 10 P.M. on October 23, 1935, as Schultz and three henchmen waited in the private dining of a Newark restaurant for an important meeting with the Big Six, three men suddenly appeared and sprayed them with bullets, killing the three henchmen in the dining room and Schultz while he was standing at a urinal. Police investigators New York and New Jersey found no suspects or witnesses - even the bar-tender saw nothing - and the case was eventually dropped.

A year later, Dewey nailed Luciano with a 30 to 50 year sentence for running prostitution. He served 10 years, but in 1946, he was released and deported to Italy, apparently for having acted as an intermediary between the Allies and the Italian underground during World War II.

In 1947, Siegel was blown away in a hail of bullets in his Beverly Hills home, a gangland killing, rumored to have been engineered by his Big Six partners for skimming profits.

With those minor exceptions, the partnership operated until the mid 50's, and ended more or less from age and attrition after more than 25 years of apparent honor among thieves, at least among most of them.

Longie's world started to fall apart in 1951, when he and his three remaining Big Six partners were subpoenaed, along with hundreds of other underworld characters, to testify before the Kefauver Senate Committee investigating organized crime. Longie testified for six days, speaking politely and quietly, presenting himself as, yes, someone who had been a bootlegger during Prohibition, but who, for the past 20-plus years, was a law-abiding businessman. Nevertheless, in his final report, Kefauver described him as the number one criminal in America.

The hearings were televised and widely publicized, and swept away the anonymity and aura of respectability that Longie had so guarded carefully for so many years. In addition, he knew that the attendance of IRS agents at the hearings signaled more trouble.

In 1953, he was charged with evading 1945 income taxes, but, to the shock of almost everyone but Longie, the grand jury failed to indict.

In 1954, he was charged with evading 1947 and '48 taxes. This time he was indicted, but in 1956, after a six-week trial and 30 hours of deliberation, the jury reported that it was unable to

reach a unanimous verdict, and was dismissed. When the court's trial docket for the next judicial session came out, his case was not on it.

Longie was home free. He turned day-to-day operations over to his top lieutenant, and started to was for his retirement.

But on February 16, 1959, ten days before Longie's suicide, J. Edgar Hoover himself proudly announced the arrest of five men, two of Longie's henchmen and an outside third person who were charged with bribing jurors in the 1956 trial, and two jurors who were charged with accepting the bribes. A few days later, Longie's chauffeur and bodyguard and several of his closest associates, including Herman Cohen, a life-long 3rd Ward friend, were charged with participating in the bribes.

Acting on a tip, FBI agents had tapped Cohen's office phone and picked up a long conversation between Cohen and another party, referred to in the FBI file only as "Informant." in which Cohen described how the jurors were bribed and named Longie's chauffeur and bodyguard as one of the pay-off men. The FBI quickly identified the jurors, and in exchange for leniency, both agreed to cooperate with the prosecution.

Longie didn't know how the FBI obtained such detailed information, but he knew that it was impossible for them to have obtained it unless someone inside his organization was a mole. Undoubtedly, it was the Informant, whose name apparently was redacted from the FBI file, and has never been disclosed.

This time, Longie had no way out.

He was always sure of his people. He took good care of them, and was confident of their loyalty. On the other hand, he never tolerated failure, and meted out grim, and sometimes the grimmest punishment to those who failed him, no matter who they were.

Including himself.

My mother barely knew Longie, but when she heard of his death, she called me in Cincinnati. "Such a shame," she said. "He was so good to his mother."
