

Books

Cradle of Crime - A Daughter's Tribute



By

MARTIN ZEILIG

"I was born into a cradle of crime on May 11, 1953," reads the epigraph in "Cradle of Crime-- A Daughter's Tribute" -- a bold and distinctive memoir by Luellen Smiley.

From the *Los Angeles Times*. May 11, 1953
 "CRIME INQUIRY TRACES VAST GAMBLING EMPIRE"

"State Commission Names Racketeers, Reports Corruption"
 "Names Listed"

"There is an absence of big syndication and organization in California", the report set forth but "There is no absence of the hoodlums in our State nor the seedbed in which to nurture new rackets." Among gangsters and their hangers-on named in that *L.A. Times* report were" Abe (Longy) Zwillman, Frank Carbo, Meyer Lansky, Allen Smiley, whose true name is Aaron Smehoff, Gerald Catena, and Willie Bischoff."

Smiley is an award-winning newspaper columnist, having written for publications such as the *New York Post*, *MORE Magazine*, and publications in Southern California, as well as having done numerous TV, radio, and documentary interviews. "Cradle of Crime" is a welcome addition to those books that bring to light the private, or "non-business", side of gangster life. Smiley's prose makes the book come alive. It reads like a compelling crime novel in places. It bodes well for her future as an author.

One hopes, though, that future editions of the book will be corrected to remove the several typos present in various places. (Similar comments have been made on Amazon.com)

The author's father, Allen Smiley, was born Aaron Smehoff. The family left Kiev, Russia in 1914, when Allen was seven. They eventually settled in at 346 Aberdeen Avenue, in the heart of north end Winnipeg. One of four children of Hymen and Anne Smehoff, Allen was raised Jewish Orthodox.

"Hymen was an orthodox butcher, he wore a long beard, and mustache. Tradition and sacrifice ordained Allen's childhood," writes the author in an earlier bio of her father. "Allen was forced by his father to take seriously Hebrew studies and school. His father was preparing Allen to become a rabbi. His dream though was to become a professional athlete.

At age 12 he dropped out of school



Author LUELLEN SMILEY, daughter of Allen Smiley, who was born in Winnipeg (and whose true name was Aaron Smehoff), and who was Bugsy Siegel's best friend

and ran away from home. In 1923, at 16, he boarded the Detroit-Windsor Ferry and entered the United States.

This reporter interviewed Smiley for an earlier article, prior to her book being published, in *The JP&N* "Former Winnipegger had close association with "Bugsy" Siegel" (April 1, 2015).

"On the evening of June 20, 1947, less than six months after he opened the Flamingo Hotel-Casino in Las Vegas, Ben 'Bugsy' Siegel died in a barrage of bullets through the front windows while sitting on a couch in his Beverly Hills mansion at 810 Linden Drive. Assassinated at the age of 41, Siegel was one of the USA's most notorious gangsters," began that previous story.

Al Smiley (1907-1983), a former Winnipegger, was with Siegel that evening.

"My dad was seated inches away from Siegel, on the sofa, and took three bullets through the sleeve of his jacket," said Luellen Smiley.

What follows are excerpts from "Cradle of Crime":

From Chapter 1: *My Father is not a Gangster*

All my life people have asked me the same questions:

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“What’s it like knowing your father was Bugsy’s partner?”

“How old were you when you found out?”

“Weren’t you afraid? You know Bugsy was a murderer?”

Los Angeles, CA. 1966,

“Lily, my mother told me your father is in a book, *The Green Felt Jungle*. It’s about gangsters. Wanna see if they have it?” I agreed to look because she was interested, but it meant nothing to me. Dena twirled the book rack around as I stood behind her watching.

“That’s the book! Let me look first and see what it says,” she whispered. I could feel her arm tense up as I grasped it.

“Oh my God! There he is” she said. We hunched over the book and read the description of my father: “Allen Smiley, one of Ben Siegel’s closest pals in those days, was seated at the other end of the sofa when Siegel was murdered.” Dena covered her mouth with one hand and kept reading silently.

“What does that mean? Who is Siegel?” I asked.

“Shush-- not so loud. I’m afraid to tell you this. It’s awful.”

“What’s awful? Tell me.”

“Bugsy Siegel was a gangster in the Mafia. He killed people. Your father was his associate.”

“That was the first time I’d seen photographs of Ben Siegel slumped on that sofa, dead with an empty bloody eye socket. I was thirteen years old. The same year my mother died.

“A few days later after Dad left for the evening I opened the door to his guarded bedroom. I walked around the bed to a get closer look at the photographs on the wall. It was the first time I could read the inscriptions: “To Smiley, from your pal, Ben.”

“It was the same man in the *Green Felt Jungle*. The photograph placed next to it of Harry Truman with a similar inscription dated 1963. The disparity of Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel alongside Harry Truman wouldn’t mean anything to me for another thirty years.

“What are you doing in my bedroom?” I slammed the drawer muted by Dad’s abrupt appearance.

“Now you listen to me and don’t forget this for the rest of your life. This is Benjamin Siegel! He was my dearest and closest friend. You’re going to hear a lot of lies about him. They call him ‘Bugsy,’ but don’t let me ever catch you using that term. You listen to what I tell you. He was our friend! The best friend I ever had.” He paused to regain his composure.

“What else do you want to know? Let’s discuss it right now! You have a question-- Ask me now.”

“Daddy what is the Mafia?”

He stared at me clenching his fists: his eyes smoldering with rage.

“There is no such thing as the Mafia! Don’t let me ever catch you using that term again! Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes.”

Chapter 8: *Revisions Inside and Out*

“Capsulated in a microcosm of government agency denouncements on Dad, it is truly not the same man I knew. From the time I turned thirteen until his death, I was twine around my father’s trunk. He passed on the virtuous commandments of trust, loyalty, honor and keeping your word. A new stage of understanding emerged, as I accepted that he was more rebel than violent enforcer, and a tenacious force against the government. Still, the split of Dad to Al keeps me awake at night. Screaming like a fresh rainbow through the crimes, associates and rackets, were the images of his younger days at Ciro’s, Mocambo, the race track, the polo fields, the movie sets. He organized gambling junkets at legendary residences in the Garden of Allah,



The late AL SMILEY

He was seated next to Bugsy Siegel when Siegel was shot through his living room window on June 20, 1947.

The Knickerbocker and Argyle Hotel, while living at the Sunset Towers. He lived in cinematic color. Our similarity seems not in the choices of entertainment or thrill, but in the rebelliousness we both chase. Had I not been supervised by Warden Smiley, chances are I would have ended up hop-scotching on the dark side.”

Chapter 12--*West to East*, from a section called *Confessions of a Mob Kid*:

“Some children are silenced. The pretense is to protect against people and events more powerful than them. As the daughter of Allen Smiley, associate and friend of ‘Bugsy’ Siegel, I was raised in a family of secrets.

“My father is not a household name like Siegel, partly because he wore a disguise, a veneer of respectability that fooled most. It did not fool the government. My father came into the public eye the night of June 20, 1947, when Benjamin Siegel was murdered in his home in Beverly Hills. My dad was seated inches away from Siegel, on the sofa, and took three bullets through the sleeve of his jacket. He was brought in as a suspect. His photograph was in all the newspapers. He was the only nonfamily member who had the guts to go to the funeral. When I was exposed to the truth by way of a book, I kept the secret too. I was thirteen. My parents were divorced, and five years later my mother died. In 1966, I went to live with my father in Hollywood. I was forbidden to talk about our life: ‘Don’t discuss our family business with anyone, and listen very carefully to what I say from now on!’

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