

**RED**

**MAFIYA**

**HOW THE**

**RUSSIAN MOB**

**HAS INVADDED**

**AMERICA**

**BY**

**ROBERT J.**

**FRIEDMAN**

*Zealots for Zion: Inside Israel's  
West Bank Settlement Movement*

# Copyright

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# INTRODUCTION

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## THE SUPERPOWER OF CRIME

I had just returned from a vacation in June 1998 when I found out how dangerous it is to investigate the Russian mob. Mike McCall, a top agent on the FBI's Russian Organized Crime Squad in Manhattan, called me with chilling news. "I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings," he said gently, "but the FBI has reliable information that a major Russian organized crime figure has taken out a contract on your life."

Belgian journalist Alain Lallemand, an expert on Russian organized crime who has suffered through hair-raising attempts on his life, once told me that the Russian mob would leave journalists alone as long they didn't come between the mobsters and their money. In a series of revelatory articles about the growing threat of the Russian mob in such publications as *New York*, *Details*, and *Vanity Fair*, I had apparently crossed this dangerous line.

Stunned, I finally managed to ask McCall what I was supposed to do in response. "We are working on this just as hard as we can," he answered, "but right now we can't preclude the possibility of something happening to you, okay?" But how could I protect myself—and my wife? McCall bluntly replied that it wasn't the FBI's responsibility to offer that kind of advice. After some pleading, he finally offered a tip: "If you have the opportunity to lie low," he said simply, "take it."

At the time, I was getting ready to fly to Miami to interview a Russian crime lord nicknamed Tarzan, a man who had sold Russian military helicopters to Colombian drug barons and was in the process of brokering a deal to sell them a submarine, complete with a retired Russian captain and a crew of seventeen, when he was arrested by the Drug Enforcement Agency. McCall told me to forget about the trip to Miami, which has the second largest concentration of Russian mobsters in the United States; a hit man could easily trace me to my South Beach hotel. For that matter, he said, I should also forget about doing any more interviews in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn—ground zero for the Russian mob in America. In fact, he advised, I should consider forgetting doing any more reporting at all on the subject.

The next day, a magazine that had just published one of my exposés of the Russian criminal underworld generously supplied me with some getaway money and a bulletproof vest. Before I could flee town, however, I noticed a thickly bearded, muscular Russian loitering around my apartment building who I was certain I had once seen in the company of a notorious Russian don nicknamed Fat Felix. I didn't waste any more time. I quickly collected my wife and drove up to a rented hideaway in Vermont.

One week spent pacing the floors of our retreat left me restless and upset, and I resolved not to be intimidated into silence or to spend another day underground. Despite the risk, I returned to my home. As far as the FBI was concerned, however, I was on my own; they refused to tell me anything further about the death order, feebly explaining that the bureau couldn't jeopardize its "sources and methods." One sympathetic DEA agent suggested that I buy myself a .357 revolver; as he explained, although it flares when it's fired and there is quite a jolt, it's more reliable than an automatic, which can jam and not constantly cleaned.

I later learned (though not through the FBI) that the author of the anonymous death threat against

me was Semion Mogilevich, the Budapest-based leader of the Red *Mafiya*, the most brilliant and savage Russian mob organization in the world. It was after I had written a long exposé of his criminal career in *The Village Voice* that he put out a contract on my life, a threat that was picked up during a telephone intercept by the Central Intelligence Agency, according to the *New York Times*. A European law enforcement official told the *Times* that the contract was for \$100,000. At least one key witness in the murder plot was killed before he could testify against Mogilevich, the *Sunday Times* of London reported.

I first began exploring the shadowy world of Russian organized crime in the late 1980s. I had spent much of my career documenting the primordial struggle between Palestinians and Jews over a tiny, bloodstained strip of land on the Mediterranean that both sides passionately love and call home. On occasion, I'd tackle such diverse stories as AIDS, prostitution, and political corruption in India. While working on an Italian Mafia story, I was introduced by a Genovese organized crime family source in New York to several of his Russian criminal colleagues, a meeting that opened a door for me into the little known, nearly impenetrable ethnic underworld. I found them to be devilishly crooked wunderkinder, who in a few years' time, I suspected, could establish a New World Criminal Order. Over the following years, I ventured into the Russians' gaudy strip clubs in Miami Beach; paid surprise visits to their well-kept suburban homes in Denver; interviewed hit men and godfathers in an array of federal lockups; and traveled halfway around the world trying to make sense of their tangled criminal webs, which have ensnared everyone from titans of finance and the heads of government to entire state security services.

In the sheltered, seaside community of Brighton Beach, I had become a polite, but persistent pest. One Brighton Beach mobster tried to bribe me; another tied me up in a frivolous, though costly, libel suit; other Russian wiseguys tried to scare me off with angry, abusive invective. Several gangsters simply accused me of being biased against Russian émigrés—a ridiculous accusation, as all four of my grandparents were Jews who fled czarist Russia for America to escape religious persecution.

Ironically, the first wave of Russian mobsters used the same excuse to gain entry to America. During the détente days of the early 1970s, when Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev had agreed to allow the limited emigration of Soviet Jews, thousands of hard-core criminals, many of them released from Soviet Gulags by the KGB, took advantage of their nominal Jewish status to swarm into the United States. The majority settled in Brighton Beach, where they quickly resumed their cruel criminal vocation.

The Russian mob may act like Cossacks, but I never seriously considered running away an option. Yet then I received a second, particularly violent death threat: "Friedman! You are a dirty fucking American prostitute and liar! I WILL FUCK YOU! And make you suck my Russian DICK!" The obscenity-laced note was placed inside a Hallmark Valentine Day's card that teased: "It was easy finding a Valentine for someone like you." The author of the threat hadn't bothered to hide his identity. It was signed Vyacheslav Kirillovich Ivankov.

The FBI has described Ivankov as the most powerful Russian mobster in the United States. Before coming to the U.S. in 1992, he spent many years in the Gulag for a number of gruesome crimes, including torturing his extortion victims, and he had personally ordered the killing of so many journalists, police, and civilians in Russia that a ruling council of mob bosses banished him from America. He arrived with several hundred no-neck thugs led by a former KGB colonel. Using his considerable intelligence and muscle, Ivankov quickly seized control of the Russian Jewish mob, which by then had grown from a neighborhood extortion racket in Brighton Beach to a brutal, innovative, multibillion-dollar-a-year criminal enterprise.



Despite his conviction in 1996 of extorting two Russian Wall Street investors, and his subsequent sentencing to a prison term in a federal penitentiary until 2005, Ivankov, according to the FBI, has continued to issue commands from his upstate New York cell, ordering the execution of his enemies and underworld rivals. When he mailed me the handwritten death threat, the fifty-nine-year-old gangster was so brazen that he included his cell block unit and prison ID number.

This time, I phoned the FBI. McCall rushed to my cramped New York apartment, where he gingerly picked up the caustic message with rubber gloves, placing it into a clear plastic folder. The bureau later considered making Ivankov's mordant valentine part of a multicount federal indictment against the godfather. "Our idea is to put him away for life," an FBI agent told me, explaining that, no longer Ivankov was in jail, the less sway he'd have over his criminal comrades. I was asked whether I'd be willing to publicly testify against the Russian. "If it makes you feel any better, I'm on his hit list, too," admitted one top FBI official in Washington. In fact, as one of the two agents who put Ivankov in prison, so was Mike McCall. But of course, they both had badges—and guns. Still, I agreed to testify, fully aware of the fact that the witnesses who had stood up against Ivankov in the Wall Street extortion case were now living secretly in the Federal Witness Protection Program.

However perilous the situation into which I was placing myself, I was aware that in Europe and the former Soviet bloc, the dangers faced by journalists are far, far worse. "Journalists pursuing investigative stories on corruption and organized crime have found themselves at great risk," stated a 1997 report from the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, "especially in Russia and Ukraine, where beatings have become routine. These physical assaults have had the expected chilling effect on investigative journalism, frightening some reporters into self-censorship or even quitting the profession, while many have resorted to using pseudonyms."

In all, thirteen journalists from the Russian Federation have been killed by the mob since the fall of communism, according to the committee. In one of the worst incidents of intimidation, Anna Zarkova, a forty-year-old award-winning crime reporter, had sulfuric acid hurled in her face in downtown Sofia in May 1998. From her hospital bed, now blind in one eye, the mother of two appealed to her colleagues not to be cowed into silence. "If they don't splash acid in your face as a journalist," she said, "tomorrow they will kill you in the street as a citizen. That's how crime escalates in this country."

Russian mobsters, in the United States, simply don't play by the unwritten rules of the acceptable uses of gangland violence. Rarely has the Italian Mafia, for instance, inflicted harm on a member of the American media, prosecutors, or judges, fully aware of the retaliation that would likely result. The Russians, however, have no such prohibition. Murder, for them, is a blood sport. "We Italians will kill you," a John Gotti associate once warned a potential snitch over a government wire. "But the Russians are crazy—they'll kill your whole family." Some eighty Russian mob-related murders still languish unsolved on the books in Brooklyn alone. "The Russians are ruthless and crazy," a retired New York City cop told me. "It's a bad combination. They'll shoot you just to see if their gun works."

It is no small irony that the FBI has become my guardian angel, for if not for its own sluggishness in addressing the problem, the Russian mob in the United States would never have become as powerful as it is today. Though FBI boss Louis Freeh has said that Russian criminals pose an "immense" strategic threat to America, the bureau didn't even set up a Russian organized crime squad in New York until May 1994, long after the Russian mob in America was well entrenched. It should perhaps come as no surprise that the FBI, which likewise failed to go after La Cosa Nostra for thirty-five years, is now playing a desperate game of catch-up.

Blending financial sophistication with bone-crunching violence, the Russian mob has become the FBI's most formidable criminal adversary, creating an international criminal colossus that has surpassed the Colombian cartels, the Japanese Yakuza, the Chinese triads, and the Italian Mafia in

wealth and weaponry. “Remember when Khrushchev banged his shoe on a table at the U.N. and said he would bury the West?” a baby-faced Russian gangster once asked me in a Brighton Beach cabaret. “He couldn’t do it then, but we will do it now!”

With activities in countries ranging from Malaysia to Great Britain, Russian mobsters now operate in more than fifty nations. They smuggle heroin from Southeast Asia, traffic in weapons all over the globe, and seem to have a special knack for large-scale extortion. The Russian mob has plundered the fabulously rich gold and diamond mines in war-torn Sierra Leone, built dazzling casinos in Costa Rica with John Gotti Jr., and, through its control of more than 80 percent of Russia’s banks, siphoned billions of dollars of Western government loans and aid, thereby exacerbating a global financial crisis that toppled Wall Street’s historic bull market in August 1998.

Tutored in the mercenary ways of a brutal totalitarian state riddled with corruption, the Russians have developed a business acumen that puts them in a class by themselves. Many of today’s foremost Russian mobsters have Ph.D.’s in mathematics, engineering, or physics, helping them to acquire a expertise in advanced encryption and computer technology. “Hell,” a senior Treasury Department official remarked, “it took them about a week to figure out how to counterfeit the \$100 Super Note which was unveiled in 1997 with much fanfare as “tamper-proof.”

More ominously, U.S. intelligence officials worry that Russian gangsters will acquire weapons of mass destruction such as fissionable material or deadly, easily concealed pathogens such as the smallpox virus—all too readily available from poorly guarded military bases or scientific labs — and sell these deadly wares to any number of terrorist groups or renegade states.

In North America alone, there are now thirty Russian crime syndicates operating in at least seventeen U.S. cities, most notably New York, Miami, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Denver. The Russians have already pulled off the largest jewelry heist and insurance and Medicare frauds in American history, with a net haul exceeding \$1 billion. They have invaded North America’s financial markets, orchestrating complex stock scams, allegedly laundering billions of dollars through the Bank of New York, and coolly infiltrating the business and real estate worlds. The Russian mob has even penetrated the National Hockey League, where many players have either been its victims or become *Mafiya* facilitators, helping the mob sink its roots further into American soil. There is even fear that NHL games may be fixed. “The Russians didn’t come here to enjoy the American dream,” New York State tax agent Roger Berger says glumly. “They came here to steal it.”

Russian mobsters in the United States aren’t just Italian wiseguy wannabes. Merging with the even more powerful *Mafiya* groups that have flourished in post-perestroika Russia, they have something the Cosa Nostra can only dream about: their own country. Just as Meyer Lansky ran Cuba for a short time until Castro seized power in 1959, the Russian mob virtually controls their nuclear-tipped former superpower, which provides them with vast financial assets and a truly global reach. Russian President Boris Yeltsin wasn’t exaggerating when he described Russia as “the biggest Mafia state in the world” and “the superpower of crime.”

In 1993, a high-ranking Russian immigration official in Moscow told U.S. investigators that there were five million dangerous criminals in the former U.S.S.R. who would be allowed to immigrate to the West. It’s nearly impossible for the State Department to weed out these undesirables because the former states of the Eastern bloc seldom make available the would-be émigré’s criminal record.

“It’s wonderful that the Iron Curtain is gone, but it was a shield for the West,” Boris Urov, the former chief investigator of major crimes for the Russian attorney general, has declared. “Now we’ve opened the gates, and this is very dangerous for the world. America is getting Russian criminals. Nobody will have the resources to stop them. You people in the West don’t know our *Mafiya* yet. You will, you will!”

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For nearly a year, the FBI promised to prosecute Ivankov for his death threat—or at least punish him by taking away some of his basic privileges. When they refused to act, I went to the Committee to Protect Journalists, which contacted the *New York Times*. On March 5, 1999, Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter Blaine Harden wrote a front-page Metro section story about the death threats. “I was a good soldier for a long time,” I told Harden, “but then I felt like a billy goat on a stake. I have been exposed too long and the people making these threats have gone unpunished too long.”

Within days after Harden called the FBI for comment, Ivankov was transferred in the middle of the night from his comfy cell at Ray Brook Correctional Institution, a medium-security federal prison near Lake Placid, New York, to the maximum-security prison at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. The *Times* reported that Lewisburg would impose considerably tighter security restrictions on him because of the threat. “I want him to know I am behind this punishment,” I told the *Times*. “And I want him to know that he cannot threaten the American press the same way the *Mafiya* does in Russia.”

# PART ONE

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## THE INVASION

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## THE HIT MAN

On a spring day when warm sunshine flooded the narrow, potholed streets, I took a taxi to the Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC), an imposing collection of tomblike cinder block towers in lower Manhattan, to interview Monya Elson—one of the most dangerous Russian mobsters the feds have ever netted. I passed through several layers of security before I was shepherded by an armed guard up an elevator and deposited in a small, antiseptic cubicle with booming acoustics where lawyers meet with their clients. I had a tape recorder and four hours of Memorex. At least half a dozen armed guards stood outside the door, which was closed but had an observation window.

Elson, an edgy man with a dark mien, was brought into the room, his hands and feet chained. He was considered a maximum-security risk, and for good reason: a natural-born extortionist and killing machine, Elson is perhaps the most prolific hit man in Russian mob history, making Sammy “the Bull” Gravano, with nineteen acknowledged hits, a mere piker. Elson boasts one hundred confirmed kills, a figure the authorities don’t dispute. With his dour-faced wife, Marina, Elson would allegedly go out on murderous rampages, rumbling around Brooklyn in the back of a van. After flinging open its doors, they would gleefully execute their shakedown victims, à la Bonnie and Clyde.

“It was a sex thing,” claims a Genovese goodfella who worked closely with Elson. “They got off on the withering bodies.”

Elson emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1978, claiming Jewish refugee status, and settled in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. His mission: to become the most legendary gangster of all time. “Nobody remembers the first man who walked on the moon,” Elson explains. “Everybody remembers Al Capone.”

Elson wore a drab brown prison uniform; his close-cropped hair, formerly thick and black, had thinned and turned salt-and-pepper like his mustache. His once handsomely roguish face was puffed and pale. Cyrillic letters were tattooed onto each finger, identifying him as a made man in the Russian mob.

When the last prison guard left the room, Elson, his hands unshackled, scooped me up in a bone-jarring Russian bear hug, kissing me on both cheeks. He was enormously strong. Elson granted me an interview, in part, because my maternal grandfather was from Kishinev, Elson’s hometown. “Oh, we have the same blood!” he said. “But it went in a different direction. I come from a different culture. I am a criminal. And for you this is bad: you were raised to believe in the law. What is good for you is not good for me. I am proud of what I am.”

Elson suddenly started pulling off his shirt and pants. “Look here! Look here!” he shouted excitedly, showing off his battle trophies. Pointing to a crater from a dum dum bullet near his heart, he boasted, “It’s still inside. And look at this: I was shot all over. It wasn’t a joke. The pain in my arm from a shooting goes through me like electricity on wet and humid days. It really hurts.”

Elson was most proud of a large tattoo that covered his right shoulder. It depicted an anguished

looking skeleton immersed in a vat of acid, desperately reaching up to grasp two angels hovering above. “In this world, a young man seeks a name,” said Elson, laying out his bleak criminal philosophy. “When he has found a name, he seeks money. When he has found money, he seeks power. But when he has power, he doesn’t wish to lose it.” Elson has spent his career clawing over the corpses of his enemies, trying to reach the top rung of Russian organized crime—a metaphorical place he called the “warm spot.”

MCC hadn’t dampened Elson’s egomania. He wanted to know what every wise guy I interviewed had to say about him.

“You spoke to somebody about me?” Elson asked, playing with an empty plastic ashtray.

“Of course.”

“Don’t say to whom. But what did they say? Tell me description. Don’t tell me who because I’ll lose my patience.”

“They say you’re a hit man, professional, one of the best,” I replied.

“Brave. Tough.”

“Also cruel.”

“Unforgiving,” Elson added. “But fair or not? I never touched an innocent person. Or they said that I did? People say I don’t have feelings, that I don’t give a fuck. It’s not true. It’s not true. First of all, if you don’t have feelings you’d have to be a Hitler, or you’d have to be a Stalin. But when you lead the kind of criminal life where somebody wants to kill you, that somebody wants to take your warm spot. You cannot let them. I don’t kill people for fun. That’s not true...”

Elson suddenly became sullen, irritable; his mouth twisted into a tight sneer. “This place is like a mental institution,” he moaned with disgust. Prison was eating into his soul, although he denied that he was having a hard time dealing with it. “I’ve been fighting since I was eleven years old. I’m a fighter. I’m not a punk.”

Elson was born to a Jewish family two years before Stalin’s death, on May 23, 1951. Kishinev, the fivecenturies-old city on the banks of the river Dnestr, was a town without pity for Jews. A pogrom on April 3, 1903, incited by the czar’s minister of the interior Vyacheslav von Plehve, killed more than fifty Jewish residents; scores of Jewish women were raped by pillaging Cossack horsemen. The pogrom was memorialized in an epic poem by Bialik, in which he lamented the plight of the Diaspora Jew as “the senseless living and the senseless dying” in a world that would always remain hostile to them. Bialik underscored the Jewish people’s deep yearnings for an independent homeland—or at least a ticket to safety in the West.

From the time that he was a boy, Elson instinctively recognized that there was only one way out of the Jewish ghetto: to excel at crime. He grew up in a rough neighborhood, which grew even rougher when, the year before he died, Stalin released thousands of inmates from the Gulag into the district. These hooligans became Elson’s heroes. “We had guys who were like the kings of the neighborhood. Tough guys. They were fighters. They weren’t afraid of the police. And in every conversation they spoke about jail. How to survive the Gulag. How to be independent of the law Russia imposed on you. When you grow up and you hear only bad things about the government, and the words were coming from cruel people who had passed through the harshest system in the world—the Gulag, the Stalin regime, and World War II—this environment, of course, has some influence on you. Because even a kid, as I understand it, in any country, wants to be tough, wants to be famous, wants to be strong somehow.” The songs Elson relished as a youth were not communist odes to the motherland, but rather, criminal folk songs with lyrics like: “This street gave me the nickname thief and gradually put me behind bars.”

Given the gross inequities of communism, where corruption wasn't just widespread but the business of the state, it was almost inevitable that the Soviet Union would be plagued by an almost institutionalized culture of thievery. As Pulitzer Prize winner David Remnick, a former *Washington Post* correspondent in Moscow, has portrayed the situation, "It was as if the entire Soviet Union were ruled by a gigantic Mob family known as the C.P.S.U. [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]. Beneath the thin veneer of official communism lay a vast underground economy of off-the-book factories, food co-ops, and construction companies that were the basis of the burgeoning black market in everything from medicines to foodstuffs. Store and restaurant managers, directors of state enterprises, officials of local, regional, and even national party institutions, and operators of collective and state farms all trafficked in illegal business. Corruption was so pervasive in the Black Sea port of Odessa, historically a major seat of organized crime in Russia, that the first secretary of the city party committee was sentenced to death in the early 1970s for black-marketeering.

By the end of the Brezhnev period, the underground sector of the economy accounted for as much as 50 percent of the personal income of Soviet workers. But it was the apparatchiks and black marketeers who profited the most, living like feudal lords in ornate hilltop palaces and summer villas, relaxing in private sanatoriums, shopping in special stores filled with Japanese consumer goods, and traveling abroad—the most coveted privilege in the restrictive Soviet Union. But the black marketeers weren't only ambitious Russians with an entrepreneurial bent; they often included nationally renowned members of the intelligentsia, sports stars, chess champions, and the cream of the art and entertainment worlds. These individuals would journey overseas under the patronage of a friend or politician, bringing back choice wares like Citroën cars, motorboats, and designer fashions for resale. Many became multimillionaires.

Unsurprisingly, the State, while officially denying the existence of crime, tolerated the criminal underworld, the thugs and extortionists who played a prime role in feeding the country's repressed appetite for consumer goods. "Organized crime in the Soviet Union bears the stamp of the Soviet political system," wrote Konstantin Simis, a lawyer who had worked in the Soviet Ministry of Justice in his exposé, *USSR: The Corrupt Society*. "It was characteristic of the system that the ruling district elite acted in the name of the Party as racketeers and extortionists, and that the criminal underworld per se paid through the nose to the district apparat for stolen goods and services."

Left out of this lucrative equation were most average Russians. Although the majority also learned to deal in illegal black market contraband to one degree or another—there was simply no other way to survive—the greedy nomenklatura, the elite membership of the Soviet governing system, and criminal demimonde hoarded the greater share of the nation's already scarce resources for themselves. Victims of the raw fear that was a legacy of the terrors of the Stalin regime as well as of communism's own ongoing murderous abuses, most of the "proletariat" literally despised the State. "Everyone in my neighborhood was bitter toward Lenin, Stalin, and later Khrushchev," Elson remembered.

In towns like Kishinev, this tremendous cynicism and distrust of authority went beyond simply an acceptance of criminality. Most people not only did business with mobsters on a daily basis, but held powerful criminals—as opposed to the loathed apparatchiks—in the highest regard. These criminals often enjoyed a reputation among the populace for their Robin Hood-like honesty; they even meted out justice in local tribunals called People's Courts, where common folk, eschewing State authorities, flocked to solve their personal disputes.

The People's Courts, which existed in towns and communities throughout the country, were largely administered by a special breed of colorful lawbreaker called *vor v zakonye*—or "thieves-in-law"—a fraternal order of elite criminals that dates back to the time of the czars. They first arose during the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725), incubated in the vast archipelago of Russia's prison camps. There, hard-core felons banded together in tight networks that soon spread throughout the Gulag.

Members were sworn to abide by a rigid code of behavior that included never working in a legitimate job, ~~not paying taxes, refusing to fight in the army, and never, for any reason, cooperating with the police or State, unless it was to trick them.~~ A giant eagle with razor-sharp talons emblazoned on their chests announced their status as *vors*; tattoos on their kneecaps meant they would not bow to anyone. They even developed a secret language that proved to be virtually indecipherable to authorities, and set up a communal criminal fund, or *obshchak*, to bribe officials, finance business ventures, and help inmates and their families.

The *vor* brotherhood grew in strength to the point that they began to play an unusual role in the nation's history. They taught Lenin's gangs to rob banks to fund the communist revolution. Later enemies of the new State used them to sow dissension, fear, and chaos. During the Second World War Stalin devised a plot to annihilate the thriving *vor* subculture by recruiting them to defend the motherland. Those who fought with the Red Army, defying the age-old prohibition of helping the State, were rewarded by being arrested after the war and thrown into the same prison camps with the *vors* who had refused to join the epic conflict. The "collaborators" were branded *suki*, or bitches. *A* night, when the Arctic concentration camps grew miserably cold, knives were unsheathed, and the two sides hacked each other to pieces; barracks were bombed and set on fire.

The "Vor Wars," or "Bitches' Wars," lasted from 1945 to 1953. When they were over, only the *vors* who refused to battle the Nazis had survived. By then, they wielded ultimate authority in prisons even over wardens, importing liquor, narcotics, and women. They slept near open windows, away from the communal toilet, where, according to their beliefs, only homosexuals and weaklings were fit to reside. *Vors* became made men in Soviet prisons only after they were recommended by at least two other *vors*. Even today, this nearly mythic criminal cult is one of the most dynamic forces in the Russian underworld.

Elson thrived among men like these. "I loved Kishinev," Elson fondly recalls. "The big guys and the tough guys used to teach me to steal from childhood. They let me go with them on burglaries. I was so skinny and small, they used to send me through the windows, and I used to open the door for them. We used to compare ourselves to the wolves of the forest, because the wolves eat only the weak animals."

By the age of nine, Elson was a full-fledged member of a fierce street gang. "We used to go from neighborhood to neighborhood to fight. The only reason we did it was to show we were strong and weren't afraid. When I was eleven, someone pulled a stiletto on me. I couldn't refuse to fight, because if I refused, I would be a hated person." His opponent made a swift, jutting move, slicing his blade through Elson's chin and into his tongue. "It was painful and I wanted to cry, but the gang leader who ordered me to fight was looking at me. I didn't cry."

Elson's parents had little patience for their son's criminal activities. "Oh, my parents beat the shit out of me," he said. Elson's father, Abraham, was a master tailor who fled Poland on the heels of the Nazi invasion. The Russians suspected that he was a German spy and exiled him to Siberia for the duration of the war. Elson's mother had been previously married, but her first husband died in the war and their two children perished of starvation. "My mother and father used to tell me: 'Monya, don't go with those bad guys, because this reflects on you. You will have a bad reputation.' But in school, I wasn't very good. I liked to fight. I liked to steal. The older guys would extort money from me, then I'd extort money from the younger kids."

"But even as a child, I thought, 'If I was born and raised in a different area, would I be the same, or different?' But later, I understood that being a criminal was my destiny. I don't know. I don't believe in God."

Inevitably Elson began to have serious run-ins with Soviet law—a crucial step in becoming a full-fledged member of the underworld. If you didn't break during a police beating, you were considered



stand-up guy. If you cracked, and became a snitch, you'd be labeled a *musor*, a Russian word that literally meant "garbage," but that has taken on the pejorative meaning of either "cop" or "rat," the worst epithet in the Russian criminal lexicon. "Before the detectives interrogated you, they'd try to beat a confession out of you," Elson said. "They put dirt in special socks and beat your kidney. Afterward, you urinate blood." Elson insists that he never squealed.

Before long, Elson graduated to one of the highest callings in the Eastern bloc's criminal pecking order—a pickpocket. Skilled pickpockets received immense respect from other criminals, and were often accorded leadership status in their gangs. Polish Jewish thieves who came to Russia during World War II were considered the best pickpockets, Elson says. They could slip a wallet out of a jacket, snatch the rubles, and return it in a split second, the victim remaining unaware.

Bent on proving his mettle, Elson moved to Moscow and joined a gang that specialized in extortion. "I don't want to brag, but I was great at this," Elson recounted. "I did it thousands of times. If the victim balked, 'I could talk nice, or put a gun to his ear.'" Monya's motto: "Don't show pity or regret when you [kill someone]. Don't even think about it."

Although by the time he was twenty-six, Elson was married, had two young daughters, and was flourishing in his gang life, political events conspired to create an even greater opportunity for him. These were the early years of *détente*, and the American Jewish establishment and their congressional allies, who had long been trying to bring Soviet Jews westward, saw a way to leverage their cause. Leonid Brezhnev saw *détente* as a way to shore up an ailing economy. In September 1972, in a speech before the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, Washington State Democratic Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson proposed linking U.S. trade benefits to emigration rights in the Soviet Union. He later co-sponsored the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which withheld most-favored-nation status from socialist countries that restricted Jewish emigration. The effort, which was bitterly opposed by Nixon and Kissinger as a threat to *détente*, was one of the factors that pressured Russia to allow tens of thousands of Jews to leave the country. In the two-year period between 1972 and 1973 alone, more than 66,000 Russian Jews emigrated, compared to just 2,808 in 1969.

But with what must have been considerable amusement, the Soviets made certain that this vast exodus was not made up solely of innocent, persecuted Jews. Much as Fidel Castro would do several years later during the Mariél boatlift, the KGB took this opportunity to empty its jails of thousands of hard-core criminals, dumping vast numbers of undesirables like Monya Elson on an unsuspecting America, as well as on Israel and other Western nations.

Persecution certainly played no role in Elson's application for Jewish refugee status. He was typical of his era—a deracinated Soviet Jew with a touch of self-loathing. "They called me a 'fucking kike' everywhere," said Elson, and "if someone called me a *Zhid*, I fought back." But otherwise, he was thinking, What kind of Jew am I? I don't know any Jewish holidays—I never heard of them. But I sang Russian songs. I ate Russian food. I spoke Russian language. I sucked inside Russian culture. The only thing he liked about being Jewish per se, he admits, was that some of the Soviet Union's top crooks were also Jews.

However, if stealing from the workers in the workers' paradise was pure pleasure, Elson reasoned then stealing from the workers in the vastly richer capitalist paradise would be nirvana. Fortunately his Soviet passport was stamped "Jew," and in 1977 he obtained a precious exit permit, and moved his family to a transit camp outside Vienna, run by the Jewish Agency.

Elson was given an Israeli visa; it was the only way the Soviets would let a Jew leave the U.S.S.R. But like many Jewish refugees, he wanted to go to the United States instead, and well-funded American Jewish organizations who supported the concept of free immigration helped large numbers of them to gain entry to America, infuriating Israel's Zionist establishment, which believed that Israel should be the destination for all the Jewish people. Soon, he was moved from Vienna to a transit camp

near Rome operated by the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society for émigrés headed to Western nations. It was in these camps, where criminals from the far reaches of the Soviet empire converged and languishing for up to months at a time, that the global menace of Russian organized crime was fomented. They proved to be both excellent recruiting stations and networking centers, where gangsters on their way to Brighton Beach met gangsters bound for Antwerp, Brussels, or London. Once the mobsters reached their destinations, they could phone up their new friends for criminal advice, intelligence, and additional contacts. Scattered around the world, Russian criminals passed on what they “learned about the local law enforcement system, the monetary system, how the banks work,” said a frustrated Drug Enforcement Agency official in New York. “And they just started beating the hell out of us. The Italians will come to New York, and that’s it. The most they can do is phone somebody back in Italy. But they don’t know anybody in London or Belgium.”

“It’s the Red Octopus,” said Louis Cardenelli, a DEA supervisor in Manhattan. “We helped foster this global organized crime monster.”

Elson waited in the Rome transit camp for three months. During his idle hours, he pickpocketed unwary Italians, using the plunder to buy designer blue jeans for his wife and daughters. Meanwhile, hoodlum comrades from Moscow who had already visited the United States paid calls on Elson to regale him with the criminal splendors of Brighton Beach. “When I asked Elson why he came to America,” one of his defense lawyers in Brooklyn bluntly acknowledged, “he said, ‘To shake people down.’”

When he arrived in New York in 1978 on a flight paid for by the U.S. government, Elson was like a nine-year-old kid who had won a lifetime pass to Disneyland. “I was free!” he said. “I could rob! I could steal! I could do whatever I wanted!”

In the 1970s, more than forty thousand Russian Jews settled in Brighton Beach, the formerly stolid working-class Jewish neighborhood that inspired Neil Simon’s gentle play *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. It was under the shadow of the elevated subway tracks on Brighton Beach Avenue, bustling with Russian meat markets, vegetable pushcarts, and bakeries, that the Russian gangsters resumed their careers as professional killers, thieves, and scoundrels. By the time of Elson’s arrival, Brighton Beach had already become the seat of the dreaded *Organizatsiya*, the Russian Jewish mob.

Elson quickly discovered that Brighton Beach was two communities. Affluent Russians resided in the well-kept Art Deco apartment buildings that lined the Atlantic Ocean, while on the many side streets, littered with crack dens and decaying clapboard homes, poor Russian families lived sometimes ten to a squalid room. The neighborhood had decayed so badly that even the local McDonald’s had shut down. Bordered on one side by the ocean and on another by an enormous middle-class housing project referred to by the émigrés as the “Great Wall of China,” the Russians built a closed world inhospitable to outsiders, that was self-consciously modeled on the city many once called home—Odessa—a tawdry Black Sea port that was once considered the Marseilles of the Soviet Union. Beehive men in fur caps walked down the boardwalk on frigid winter mornings, ice caught in their beards and hair, stopping at vendors to buy pirogi, pastry shells filled with spicy pork, topped with a dollop of sour cream. Movie houses showed first-run Russian-language films; cafés crackled with the voices of gruff conversations in Russian and Ukrainian.

The streets also crackled with gunfire. “Little Odessa” was the new Klondike, a town full of dangerous desperadoes, where the powerful crooks preyed upon the small. During this anarchic epoch of Russian organized crime in America, a “big man” gathered around him other strong men to form a gang. These groups were amoebalike; there was little loyalty, and entrepreneurial wiseguys constantly shifted allegiances in search of a score, vying with one another over Medicare and Medicaid scam

counterfeiting schemes, and drug deals. A professional hit cost as little as \$2,000, and it was often cheaper to hire a hit man than it was to pay off a loan.

The gangsters devoted most of their energy to preying on the community they helped to create. Nearly every Russian in Brighton Beach had a family member who was either connected to the mob or paying off an extortionist.

Gang leaders would headquarter their operations in one of the multitude of Russian restaurants and cabarets. The most notorious one, on Brighton Beach Avenue in the heart of Brooklyn's émigré community, was named, appropriately enough, the Odessa. It was owned by Marat Balagula, a bookish-looking hood, who bought it in 1980 and quickly turned it into mob central. He replaced the flaking paint and frayed industrial carpeting with chrome and parquet, and hired a stunning African American singer fluent in Russian. Downstairs, he opened a seafood cafeteria.

The Odessa attracted huge crowds of locals, who gorged themselves on inexpensive, family-style meals that included gluttonous portions of chopped liver, caviar, slabs of sable, beef Stroganoff, and skewers of lamb, all washed down with the bottle of Smirnoff vodka that was placed on each table. A four-piece band that looked more Vegas than Moscow played Sinatra standards and Russian pop tunes, buxom bottle blondes in black leather miniskirts danced with barrel-chested men among the cabaret's Art Deco columns. A corner of the room was sometimes reserved for members of Hadassah, a woman's Zionist group, who came to express solidarity with the Russians.

The club had odd brushes with celebrity. After an arch portrait of the Odessa appeared in *The New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town," it briefly became a popular nightspot for thirty-something yuppies who wanted to savor beans in a Caucasian walnut sauce and the titillating aura of organized crime. And pop singer Taylor Dayne got her first break at the Odessa when she answered an ad in *The Village Voice* seeking musicians. Dayne, then a plump fifteen-year-old high school girl from Long Island, was friendly with Balagula, and her picture still hangs on the nightclub's wall. When director Paul Mazursky wanted to film the cabaret scene in *Moscow on the Hudson* with Robin Williams in the Odessa, Balagula declined, afraid of drawing too much attention to the club. The scene was shot at the National restaurant, a rival Brighton Beach mob hangout then owned by Alexander "Cabbagehead" Skolnick, a Danny DeVito look-alike with a violent streak.

Late at night, after the last diner left the Odessa, the American version of the People's Court often convened upstairs in the disco. But unlike back in the Soviet Union, in Brighton Beach the tradition of influential criminals adjudicating local disputes "became corrupt," explained a prominent Russian émigré. "There is never a time when the judges don't take a piece of the action." The judges were often Balagula and two of his thugs, who meted out sentences while seated around a table in the cabaret. The lights were dimmed, and no food or water was provided. "It is very, very dark, like a *Godfather* movie," said an émigré who was summoned to several proceedings. "The first thing I saw was 'Why don't you turn on the lights?' Silence. Total silence."

It was just such a setting that greeted the small-time jewel thief Vyacheslav Lyubarsky, who was ordered to appear in "court" to settle a \$40,000 gambling dispute. The judges quickly ruled against him, and when Lyubarsky balked, he was suspended, naked, from a light fixture. Then one of the judges, Emile Puzyretsky, whacked out on coke and vodka, threatened to disembowel him. Puzyretsky, who had spent twelve years in the Soviet Gulag for murder and was decorated with Technicolor tattoos of a skeleton, bats, a snow leopard, and an angel, had become one of Little Odessa's most feared enforcers. "He uses his knife on every occasion," notes his FBI file.

As a newcomer to Brighton Beach, Elson found himself in a strange and unfamiliar land, and he had to learn a different set of survival skills. "One thing that disappointed me about America is that people don't carry money," he said with a frown. "Everything is credit card." He adapted in the manner he knew best: "I started working credit card scams, even though I didn't know how to spee

English.”

Elson soon teamed up with forty-eight-year-old Yuri Brokhin, an intellectual of moderate accomplishments who had immigrated to the United States with his wife in 1972. Since then he had managed to foster a reputation for himself as a prominent Russian Jewish dissident. He wrote two books, as well as articles for *Dissent*, *Jewish Digest*, and the *New York Times Magazine*, most of which were fierce anticommunist polemics.

“I heard about Brokhin in Moscow,” Elson said. “He was well known. His nickname was ‘Student.’ I used to call him ‘Brain.’”

Together, the pair embarked on a lucrative crime spree, stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of jewelry, often using a simple, no-risk scam. Corruption in Manhattan’s diamond district on 47th Street was so rampant at the time that the authorities had all but given up policing it. All Brokhin and Elson had to do was to identify crooked store-owners, visit their shops, and demand the goods. “We tried to rob thieves,” Elson says. They knew that their “victims” were so deep into their own crimes that they’d never call the police, but would simply pass the losses on to their insurance companies. Soon, storeowners throughout the diamond district were seeking out the Russian robbers to stage fake burglaries so that they, too, could scam their insurers.

The duo employed a different gambit to rob honest jewelers. They’d dress up as ultra-Orthodox Jews, replete with paste-on beards, side curls, long black coats, and black hats. Entering a jewelry store run by an Orthodox Jew, they would ask to see a variety of expensive diamond stones from the display case. Brokhin would babble away in Yiddish, distracting the salesman, while Elson switched the diamonds with zirconium. They’d continue to haggle, and after failing to make a deal, would slip away with the jewels tucked snugly inside the pockets of their coats. The con is called the “fast finger.” “We made a lot of money with that,” Elson boasts.

Once, after pulling the scam on a trip to Chicago, the two men were arrested in their Orthodox Jewish attire as they boarded a plane at Midway Airport. It happened to be Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, when observant Jews are strictly forbidden to travel. An airport security guard who was Jewish became suspicious, thinking the men looked more like Cuban terrorists than rabbis. Pictures of them in Hasidic garb appeared the next day in Chicago newspapers. Brokhin’s wife rushed to Chicago with \$175,000 in cash for bail; somehow, they both got off without a jail sentence. Their records were also expunged. “It’s a lot of money to get off the hook” and beat a felony rap, said Elson enigmatically.

Although they were pulling in good money, it was still a small-time operation and Elson was burning with ambition. He increasingly turned to vicious acts of drug-influenced extortion to make a name for himself. Failing to move up the criminal food chain, he decided to join the most powerful gang in Brighton Beach, headed by the rapacious Evsei Agron. Elson, however, was disappointed in his new boss’s management style. “Agron wanted to be the sun, but he didn’t want the sun’s rays to fall on somebody else,” Elson grumbled. “I wanted to kill him. But you see, it was not so easy.”

The tempestuous gangster from Kishinev realized that his future—if he had one at all—showed little promise in the Darwinian world of Brighton Beach. Frustrated, Elson trekked to the jungles of South America in 1984 to set up a cocaine smuggling operation. “I went to Peru, I went to Bolivia, I passed through a lot of South America,” Elson recounted. Although he didn’t yet speak Spanish, he ventured deep into the tropical rain forest to purchase cocaine. “I wasn’t interested in one key, two keys, three keys. I was making huge deals,” crowed Elson, who operated out of Europe and Israel. Still, the criminal big time eluded him and he was incarcerated in Israel for trafficking in cocaine.

Years later, however, Elson would return to Brighton Beach with a vengeance, creating one of the most powerful Russian mob families in the world, while initiating a gangland war that left a trail of bodies from the street corners of New York to the back alleys of Moscow.

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## THE LITTLE DON

The man who deprived Monya Elson of his warm spot, seemed, at first glance, too unprepossessing a figure to become Brighton Beach's first don. A short, grandfatherly man, Evsei Agron attracted little attention as he passed through Immigration at Kennedy Airport on October 8, 1975. He was one of the 5,200 Soviet Jewish émigrés to enter the United States that year, many of them gangsters sent from Russia by the KGB. He had listed his occupation as "jeweler," and perhaps he had even once been one. But he had also served seven years for murder in a Soviet prison camp, from which he emerged as a *vor*. After leaving Russia in 1971, he ran a large prostitution and gambling ring in Hamburg, West Germany. And even though he had supposedly been cast out of the *vor* brotherhood for welching on gambling debt, the order's ferocious reputation gave him sufficient cachet to quickly seize power when he arrived in Brighton Beach. Little else is known about Agron's early years. His records from the Soviet Union were sealed, and few of his victims from the Old Country who are still alive are willing to share their reminiscences.

From a modest office at the El Caribe Country Club, a catering hall and restaurant, the Leningrad-born Agron ran a vicious extortion ring that terrorized the Russian émigré community. "They were scared shitless of him," FBI agent William Moschella has recalled. By 1980, his gang was bringing in tens of thousands of dollars a week. Agron's victims ran the gamut from Russian doctors and lawyers to shopkeepers and grocery store owners on Brighton Beach Avenue. "What if they refused to pay?" chuckled a gang member in mock amusement. "We'd beat them in their store right in front of everybody. But they paid. They knew what was coming if they didn't pay. They knew they'd get murdered, if they don't pay."

Agron once threatened to kill a Russian émigré's daughter on her wedding day if he didn't pay \$15,000. Going to the police would have simply guaranteed a late-night visit from one of Agron's henchmen, like the Nayfeld brothers, or the forty-five-year-old Technicolor killer Emile Puzyretsky. "Puzyretsky had a great contempt for life. He killed his enemies with force, fury, and no mercy," a Russian Militia colonel recalled.

One of the most terrifying sounds in Brighton Beach was Puzyretsky's voice on the other end of the phone. "You have to pay!" Puzyretsky screamed at a recalcitrant shakedown victim in one taped recorded conversation. "Otherwise you're not going to live! And if you survive, you're not going to be able to work anymore!"

"Willy, please don't terrorize me anymore," pleaded the distraught Russian émigré, who was being ordered to hand over \$50,000. "We aren't livin' in a jungle. We live in U.S.A."

"You fuckin' rat... I'll make you a heart attack. This is the last time you'll be able to see. If you don't give the money... just wait and see what's goin' to happen to you."

Puzyretsky was paid—with interest.

The Nayfeld brothers were just as savage. The steroid-enhanced thugs emigrated from Gome

Russia, in the early 1970s. The black-bearded Benjamin, a former member of the Soviet Olympic weightlifting team, was a bear of a man with a twenty-two-inch neck. He once killed a Jewish youth in a Brighton Beach parking lot in front of dozens of witnesses by picking him up like a ragdoll with one hand and plunging a knife into his heart with the other. The teenager had allegedly insulted Benjamin's girlfriend and reached for a weapon. After the murder, eighteen witnesses vouched for Benjamin's version of events, insisting the stabbing was a justifiable homicide, and the case was dropped.

By all accounts, Boris Nayfeld was even more fearsome than his brother. To this day, superstitious Russian émigrés insist that his eyes are sheer white orbs, a sign that he has no soul and is possessed by the devil.

Olga, the owner of two hair salons in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, recalls the day in the mid-1980s when Boris and Agron swaggered into her brother's Brooklyn restaurant and ordered him to sell his one-third stake at a rock-bottom price. "The restaurant was not doing well," she says. "He wanted to sell, but at a fair price." When he refused, "Boris clubbed my brother over the head with his gun."

Olga and her family lived in the same Brighton Beach apartment complex as Nayfeld and his non-Jewish wife. "Boris's kids were always playing with *my* kids in *my* house," said Olga, still enraged over the decade-old incident. One night, she tailed Boris's Mercedes. At an intersection, she hit her bright red car and flew out of the car to pick a fight: "How dare you, you shit! To do this in the house where you live, you bastard!"

"We're only trying to help your brother," replied an unfazed Nayfeld, who with Agron stole the restaurant anyway.

Resistance like Olga's was rare. For the most part, the community endured the horrible violence inflicted on them by a large and growing criminal class. They had left a brutal society where the state and the government were as crooked as the crooks. Their blatant distrust of authority carried over to the United States. The American government, which had generously given them refuge and financial assistance, was still the enemy. There was a great tolerance for white-collar crime. The new émigrés routinely cheated on their taxes, stole food stamps and welfare benefits, and shopped in sable coats while their late-model Mercedes were parked in the mall. Medicare, Medicaid, and other forms of insurance scams were ubiquitous. Stealing from the government was as much a part of their culture as was paying off the mob. Their own xenophobia was one of their greatest enemies. It allowed the mobsters in their midst to act with impunity.

However viciously cruel his subordinates, it was Agron who was despised above all in Brighton Beach. His own brand of cruelty involved carrying around an electric cattle prod, with which he enjoyed personally torturing his victims. Unlike some Russian *vors*, Agron held fear above honor. "If Agron had been an honorable godfather, he wouldn't have had to use brute force to extort money from shopkeepers," says Ivan, a former resident of Brighton Beach and a Gulag vet. "Instead, he would have been showered with gifts, both as a sign of homage and as payment for protection from ruthless street predators like Monya Elson. The owners of the stores would have said, 'Oh, please take from me.'"

The widespread antipathy toward Agron finally found its release one night in 1980. While strolling down the Coney Island boardwalk, Agron was shot in the stomach and lost part of his lower intestine.

"We hired a retired cop to stand guard over him at Coney Island Hospital," recalled a Genovesi wiseguy who had begun a close alliance with Agron. "I have a friend in police intelligence. He went to talk to Evsei, who had tubes in his nose and arms."

"Do you know who shot you?" asked the detective.

"Yes," Agron nodded.

The detective reached into his suit and took out a ballpoint pen and pad. "Who? We'll take care of it," he said soothingly.

Wagging his finger, Agron rasped, "I'll take care of it myself."

~~There was no shortage of theories about who shot Agron. Perhaps it was connected to Agron's~~ local gambling debts, said the smart money on the Brighton Beach boardwalk. Perhaps the hit was contracted by someone Agron had chiseled in Germany, the Genovese source surmised. Perhaps a member of his own gang thought it was time to replace the imperious don, shopkeepers along Brighton Beach Avenue prayed.

Agron shrugged off the attempt on his life. He remained supremely self-confident. His boys were making major scores in everything from truck hijackings to Medicare fraud. He even purchased a Russian-language newspaper in Brighton Beach so the burgeoning émigré community could read the news that was fit to print according to the little don.

The paper was torched.

Still, Agron retained an iron grip over the most powerful Russian crime group in Brighton Beach with outposts in at least a half dozen North American cities. Agron's criminal authority was bolstered by two highly potent allies: the Genovese crime family and Ronald Greenwald, a politically savvy, well-connected Orthodox Jewish rabbi. These connections, Agron concluded, made him invincible. More than that, without Greenwald's careful nurturing of Agron's criminal career, and the Italian Mafia's muscle, the Russian mob in America might never have been anything more than a minor annoyance, a two-bit gang of émigré hoodlums.

The nexus between the Russian mob and the Italians was a man named Murray Wilson, whose consummate money laundering skills had earned him a reputation at the FBI as a modern-day Meyer Lansky. Wilson, a Genovese associate, engineered some of the Russian mob's first big criminal scores, and eventually he would help a second generation of Russian racketeers become a financially sophisticated global peril.

Wilson was raised in a bare-knuckles neighborhood in the Bronx, where Jewish gangs like Murder, Inc. once roamed. He preferred hanging out with street corner wiseguys to pursuing a "legit" career like his able cousin, Marvin Josephson, the founder of International Creative Management, the largest theatrical and literary talent agency in the world. Barely managing to eke out a diploma from Taft High School, Wilson nonetheless effortlessly mastered the intricacies of offshore accounts, letters of credit, and complicated international stock market transactions. In the process, Wilson, who has an import-export firm and is a restaurateur, became the focus of at least eight criminal probes.

Wilson's patron in the Genovese family was underboss Venero "Benny Eggs" Mangano. Benny Eggs began his career as a soldier with Lucky Luciano and rose to oversee the Genovese family's multibillion-dollar-a-year racketeering enterprise. He once boasted over an FBI wire that he surrounded himself with Jewish associates as fronts to help generate and hide illicit funds because they were shrewder at such financial dealings than the Italians. According to Benny Eggs, when a Jew had an annual income of two or three million dollars he would declare a healthy \$300,000 of it on his taxes, enough to avoid raising any suspicions with federal authorities. An Italian wiseguy, on the other hand, might declare only ten grand. It was the IRS, he warned, that had nailed Al Capone.

Fortunately for La Cosa Nostra, Wilson, a pugnacious, right-wing Jewish militant who was active in resettling Russian Jewish émigrés in Brooklyn, quickly deduced that many of the new arrivals were not long-suffering, downtrodden Jewish dissidents, but professional thieves and hit men—a potential bonanza for the Genovese crime family. The Italians were not only getting the services of highly skilled Russian crews, but were extending their control to a new neighborhood. They already had affiliations, for example, with the Greek mob in Queens and the coke-pushing Dominican gangs in Washington Heights.

Wilson introduced Agron to the Genovese chieftains, forming the nucleus of the dark alliance. "Every day didn't go by when a truck hijacking or a jewelry heist didn't go down," a Genovese goodfella wh

committed many street crimes with the Russians admitted. “It was a time of high adrenaline. Although Agron was very much the junior partner, enamored of the Italians for their well-entrenched national power base, their vast army of soldiers and political connections, the Genovese bosses valued Agron’s crew for its tireless work ethic, ruthlessness, and most especially, its global connections.

Nevertheless, there were major cultural differences between the ethnic crime groups that sometimes caused friction: with a few exceptions, the Italian gangsters lived quiet lives in modest houses, trying not to call attention to themselves. On the other hand, “the Russians have a tremendous zest for life and like to live large,” says James DiPietro, a criminal attorney in Brooklyn who has represented both Russian and Italian underworld figures. “They keep saying we are Russians and we are proud of being Russians. Russians are the best! One Halloween at Rasputin”—a Russian mob haunt in Brooklyn—“they came in Ronald Reagan masks, in limos; they love to flaunt their affluence.”

And unlike the Russians, the Italian mobsters more or less adhere to established rules of conduct. “The Italians don’t kill civilians—not even the family members of rats. The Russians have no such codes,” says DiPietro.

Rabbi Ronald Greenwald did as much for Agron’s career as did the Italian gangsters, and he helped groom a new generation of Russian wiseguys to enter corrupt Third World countries and loot their natural resources, a charge the rabbi denies. But well-placed sources say that some of the little don’s biggest scams were hatched in the rabbi’s downtown Manhattan commodities firm. Greenwald says he first met Agron in West Berlin while he was innocently sitting in a hotel lobby wearing a yarmulke. The rabbi says Agron started a conversation with him about Judaism. He claims he didn’t know that Agron was a vicious extortionist who tortured victims with a cattle prod and ran an infamous prostitution and gambling empire. Greenwald allegedly helped Agron get a U.S. visa, according to several former business associates of both men. The rabbi denies that he helped Agron enter the United States, but admits that the mobster would sometimes visit his Manhattan office. In fact his office was a magnet for a host of Russian and Italian gangsters, as well as a powerful U.S. congressman and a convicted KGB spy.

Greenwald was born on the Lower East Side in 1934. “I was the only kid in school who played hardball without a glove,” Greenwald told me. “That’s how tough I am!” He went to Jewish day schools and then to rabbinical college in Cleveland. Though he is an ordained Orthodox rabbi, he never took the pulpit. “I felt I should be out in the work world.”

At one time or another Greenwald has been a bank director, president of a small business college, a gas station owner, chaplain for the New York state police, a liaison between a segment of New York’s Orthodox Jewish community and the state Republican party—and a high-risk entrepreneur with ties to the Genovese crime family and the Russian mob.

But it was as a political operative for Richard Nixon that Greenwald first made a name for himself. The then-president had received 17 percent of the Jewish vote in 1968, and he wanted to double it in 1972. New York, with its huge Jewish population, was a crucial state. And Greenwald, as one 1972 *New York Times* story put it, was “key to [Nixon’s] New York effort.”

Greenwald was recruited by CREEP—the Committee to Reelect the President—to mine for Orthodox Jewish votes. He toured synagogues, warning that McGovern would betray Israel and wipe away Jewish gains by giving away too much to blacks. His efforts paid off: Nixon received nearly 30 percent of the Jewish vote in 1972.

The rabbi was repeatedly in the throes of some political scandal or other. After Nixon was reelected, for example, he was rewarded with a plum post at the Department of Health, Education, and



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