Lansky, Meyer (1902?-1983) Encyclopedia Article

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Meyer Lansky loomed large in the American imagination both in his lifetime and afterward. Upon his death he was hailed as "the Mob's treasurer," "the Mafia's banker," and "the most influential Godfather in the history of American organized crime." Obituaries across the country reported how, under Lansky's supervision, organized crime penetrated legitimate businesses and moved "from back alleys to executive boardrooms," according to the *New York Daily News.* Lansky was the inspiration for the Hyman Roth character (played by famed acting teacher Lee Strasberg) in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part II* (1974) and was portrayed in other mafia films, including *Bugsy* (1991)and *Mobsters* (1991). His life was detailed in the Michael Lasker character in the television miniseries *The Gangster Chronicles* (1981). In *Lansky,* a 1999 HBO cable feature written by acclaimed playwright David Mamet, Richard Dreyfuss played the famed Jewish gangster. But the stories that nurtured the Lansky legend—those that boasted about his leadership of Murder, Inc., a group of killers for hire, and his position as "Chairman of the Board" of the mob's National Syndicate—could not be corroborated by his biographer Robert Lacey. In fact, much of Lansky's life has not been verified; sources differ about his birth name, his birth year, his nationality, how he met his two "best" friends Salvatore "Lucky" Luciano and Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, whether or not he ordered Siegel's assassination, and whether he died with a fortune of nearly $300 million or very little money.

Further Reading:

Eisenberg, Dennis, Uri Dan, and Eli Landau. *Meyer Lansky: Mogul of the Mob.* New York, Paddington Press, 1979.

Massick, Hank. *Lansky.* Berkeley, Medallion, 1971.

Lacey, Robert. *Little Man: Meyer Lansky and the Gangster Life.* Boston, Little Brown, 1991.