

A little more about my father:

My paternal grandparents came from Odessa, in the Ukraine. How they got to Saint Paul, I have no idea. They were Orthodox Jews, very pious. My grandfather was considered a Rabbi in the community, not such a distinction as you might think, since many of the older men – in between efforts at making a living – spent a lot of their time studying the Torah and the various rabbinical interpretations thereof. By the time I came along, my grandfather was relatively prosperous, owning not only a small junk yard, but a cow as well: many families less fortunate owed their children's health to my grandparents' charity. True to their Orthodox beliefs, my grandparents never got rich, preferring to give the extra income away to others more needy.

My father was born in 1895, in Saint Paul, the first of his family to be born a U.S. citizen. Two older siblings had been born in Russia. None of the children took up the nigh-fundamentalist religion of my grandparents, although the oldest – a boy – did end up adopting his father's stern attitudes.

For the first four years of my life, we lived within a block of my grandparents' house in a four-plex, smack in the middle of the Jewish ghetto on the west bank of the Mississippi river, across from downtown. English, Yiddish and Russian were spoken in about equal measure.

When he was about ten years old, Dad joined a few of his friends to engage in a blood sport: selling newspapers on street corners downtown. The rules were simple: if you want a corner, you fight the person who has it. If you are the one who is left standing, it's yours. I asked him how often he had to defend his turf, and he told me that he got into disputes with other Jews maybe once a month, and occasionally engaged in gang rumbles between the Jews, and the Irish who lived north of downtown and had their own established corners.

During Prohibition, long since too old to work the newsboy raked, Dad existed on odd jobs from the bootleggers. He was a very charming guy, and managed to make a buck without doing anything very dangerous. Basically, Dad was a two-bit hustler with a friendly smile who could run very fast if trouble loomed.

Dad had been Minnesota state snooker champion in his 20s (snooker is a form of pool). During the 30s, he would go on the road, from one small town to another, walk into a pool hall, announce that he was a very excellent pool player, and that he would be glad to entertain a wager from anyone who thought he was good enough. Because he was up-front about his abilities, only about one of every three pool halls he played in took his winnings away and ran him out of town.

One time, in Fargo North Dakota, he found himself on the street penniless. It was winter, in the middle of the depression, and he was desperate. In Fargo at that time, black men pretty much had a lock on the railway station platform, where they would approach arriving passengers offering to carry their luggage for tips. Crossing them could easily be fatal, but desperation won out and as the train came into the station, he positioned himself where he thought the porters would not see him hustling the arrivals. He almost got away with it.

About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way to the station entrance with the luggage, one of the porters spotted him and began chasing him with a knife, intent upon cutting him. He started running, but the porter proved to be faster. Just before the porter caught up with him, a shot rang out. A white sheriff, seeing a white man being chased by a black man, did the accepted thing, and shot the porter in the back, killing him. Rather shaken up, Dad headed back for Saint Paul.

Around 1938, when I was born, Dad threw in with an old school – and newspaper – chum of his named Tubby Tankenoff, and they started a pool-hall with a back room where Dad held forth with a deck of cards. Finally, just in time for my arrival, he achieved some real modicum of financial comfort.

In those days, the Jews were the crooks and the Irish were the police. The same race hatred that had motivated them as kids now operated in their world as adults. The results were a constant flow of Irish cops in and out of the pool hall with their hands out. Eventually, a Jewish capo colorfully nicknamed Kid Cann (why, I don't know) made a sort of tenuous financial peace with the police commissioner, and things settled down to a pleasant routine.

One day, Kid Cann, who was another of my Dad's childhood buddies, walked into the pool hall and asked to talk to Dad. Now that peace had been established, he said, it was time for Dad to do something in return: put a book into the pool hall. Dad refused. The Kid was none too happy, but he let it slide. After two more requests, he got nasty. "Do you know what I could do to you"? he asked. "Not much", Dad replied. "Oh, yeah?" said the Kid, fuming. "How do you figure that"? "Simple", my dad said: "If anything bad happens to me, my mother will tell your mother on you!"

Since the two moms were lifelong friends, that settled that.

Most of the rest of my memories of Dad's career are outlined in "Father". As to the man himself, he was a decent guy trying to make a living for himself and his family, who – I wasn't born until he was in his mid-forties – only differed from most men of his generation in the ways he tried to make it.

I ended up adopting a lot of his philosophy and perspective, but wasn't a very good student. I play a lousy game of poker, and unlike him I got caught and went to prison.