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The Jewish murderer who married the minister's daughter

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

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While Pretty Boy Floyd, John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde terrorized America, Murt and Irv Millen, along with MIT-educated Abe Faber, did their best to contribute to the mayhem by shooting up Massachusetts.

Their criminality reached its crescendo shortly after Murt married the Rev. Brighton's very beautiful teenage daughter, Norma. By the time they were caught in 1934, movie theaters and banks had been robbed and people killed in Fitchburg, Lynn and Needham.

In the end, a minor repair job on the battery of their getaway car did them in.

When the Mordecai family left Russia in the 1890s, they changed their name to Millen and used their blacksmith skills to fashion iron gates, fences and ornaments. Joe, "the cranky one," fought with his family, co-workers and anyone who got in his way.

Even his marriage to Carolyn was fraught with violence and stress, exacerbated no doubt by the premature deaths of five of their 11 children. Unfortunately for their future victims, Murton and Irving were among those who made it to adulthood.

While many immigrant groups suffered in poverty, the Millens did not, living in an 11-room house in Roxbury, where, at times, servants were employed to help out.

Despite their wealth, the bulky Joe exhorted misery and shouted and punched out any joy the family might have had. He regularly belittled and beat his "problem child," Murt, who said nothing despite feeling fury and contemplating suicide. Irving was derided as the family idiot who stuttered and twitched as he spoke and smiled a goofy grin.

For Boston English High School classmate Abraham Faber, the tough-talking and quick-acting Murt possessed all the qualities Abe lacked. Timid and shy, Abe also had a noticeable twitch, could not look one in the eye, and had few friends. But despite his shortcomings, Abe had the brains to attend the highly prestigious MIT, where he studied aeronautical and structural engineering and graduated in 1931. He also had joined the ROTC, where he demonstrated an impressive ability handling firearms.

Notwithstanding his education, the Depression raged and Abe developed the grudge of working hard but accomplishing little. Murt held a similar grudge but came at it from a different angle. He traveled, raced cars, and worked until he got fired or left. Somehow he always had money and came to believe that only saps worked and that success simply meant taking what you wanted.

Murt and Norma met at a Nantasket Beach nightclub on Labor Day in 1933. Although starting her senior year in Natick, Norma's education was just beginning.

The fetching daughter of a divorced minister who had left his congregation to run a car dealership by day and attend Suffolk Law School at night, Norma quickly fell in love with the older and experienced Murt, who exposed her to smoking, drinking and, as he had impressed on Irv and Abe, "getting out and living." They were married within two months.

The Millen-Faber gang soon moved into high gear, stealing cars and robbing movie theaters and, in the process, kidnapping and terrorizing employees.

On Dec. 11, 1933, World War I veteran Ernest Clark closed the Fitchburg gun shop where he worked and started walking home. The gang waited for him nearby, planning to kidnap and bring him back to the store. When Clark resisted, Murt shot and killed him.

On Jan. 2, the gang struck again, this time in Lynn, committing, as the papers put it, the “boldest hold up” in the city’s history. The plan was to rob the Paramount Theater; 11 hostages were eventually taken and held, while the group waited for an employee to arrive to open the safe.

When Henry Condon tried to escape, he was shot. When 65-year-old Fred Sumner balked, he too was blasted — fatally. Less than \$200 was found in the safe when it was finally opened. After robbing some of the hostages, the gangsters sped off, shooting at a slower moving vehicle that was hindering their escape.

And then came Feb. 2.

The bank by the railroad tracks in downtown Needham still stands today, albeit under another name. As a train chugged by on an early winter day in 1933, Abe entered with a sawed-off shotgun followed by Murt with a machine gun, and Irv with two pistols.

One of the startled bank employees hit the alarm button.

In the turmoil that followed, Abe fired, striking the 75-year-old vault guard. To get the lone teller to move more quickly, Irv fired two shots at him, which quickened his response.

With \$14,000 secured, the gang fled as Officer Forbes McLeod responded to the alarm. Murt greeted him with the rat-a-tat of machine gun rounds.

Grabbing two hostages who were ordered to stand on the outside running board of their Packard, Murt sped off with Abe and Irv in the back seat. As he drove, Murt thrust his machine gun out the window and blasted away, discouraging anyone from getting in their way.

With the car hurtling into Needham Heights, one of the hostages leapt from the car, barely escaping the bullets from Irv’s gun. Alerted to the robbery, Officer Frank Haddock, who had been talking to firefighter Tim Coughlin, spotted a car with a man hanging on its outside, headed at them. Haddock pulled out his gun, and the hostage waved at him not to shoot. Murt steadied his bulky weapon and pulled the trigger.

Haddock and Coughlin fell.

The deaths of Officers McLeod and Haddock set off a mammoth police hunt for their killers, who, along with Norma, drove the Packard to Norwood, ditched it in a wooded area, and set it on fire.

Fortunately for the authorities — who had little to go on other than determining that bullets retrieved from all three crime scenes came from the same gun — the torched car quickly turned up.

Upon examining its large and unique battery, they noticed that it had been repaired and altered from its original condition. With the assistance of the press, the police located the repair shop that had done the work and the names of those who had brought it in: Irv and Murt Millen.

The chase was on. It did not take long.

Murt, Irv and Norma were arrested in New York City, thanks to good police work, intercepted letters and cooperating witnesses. Once captured, all four — Abe never left Boston — talked freely and incriminated themselves, although Norma was essentially portrayed as a clueless and naïve youngster.

Given their incriminating statements, Murt, Irv and Abe argued that they were not guilty due to their mental conditions. The battle of experts commenced, and the trial lasted longer than any other murder-one in the history of the commonwealth.

During the proceedings, the notorious Bonnie and Clyde were shot dead in Louisiana. The Boston press reported it below the ongoing Millen-Faber proceedings.

After 37 days, the all-male sequestered jurors, who had been allowed to shower once a week, got the case. It took them six hours to render a verdict.

Guilty. The sentence: death.

While awaiting their fate, Murt and Irv, with help from the outside, tried a daring escape that failed. On June 7, 1935, the brothers and Abe sat in the electric chair. It marked the first time two brothers were put to death on the same evening.

Norma was tried as an accessory, found guilty, and served more than a year in jail. She later married and had a son. She died of acute alcoholism in 1964 at age 48. Shortly thereafter, her son, who had mental problems and was institutionalized, murdered a fellow patient. He killed himself a year later.

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