

Meyer Lansky, Little Big Man

LITTLE MAN

Meyer Lansky and the Gangster Life

By Robert Lacey

Little, Brown; 647 pages; \$24.95

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL STERN

When FBI agents raided the New Jersey headquarters of the Lucchese crime family in the mid-1980s, they found two icons on the wall of the Newark luncheonette: photographs of Al Capone and Meyer Lansky. Here were the Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll of America's greatest urban folk tale, Capone as the apotheosis of the Mob's brutal violence and corruption, Lansky the legendary "Chairman of the Board" of organized crime, the shadowy financial mastermind behind the scenes.

This anecdote exemplifies both the deft irony and thorough research of Robert Lacey's superb biography of Lansky, "Little Man." By the time of his death in 1983, Lansky wasn't rich, powerful or well-connected, Lacey says. He was a poor, tired old man with an insane first wife, and with a

daughter who was an FBI informant and other children who were suicidal or estranged. But, as the subject of endless pulp histories of the syndicate, brilliantly caricatured as "Hyman Roth" in "The Godfather, Part II" (and more typically stereotyped as "Manny Weisbord" in TV's florid "Crime Story"), Lansky had become the prisoner of his own publicity.

Lansky was perceived as the boss of bosses not only by a credulous public and a zealous FBI but also by people who should have known better. Informants made their careers by making up stories about him (the government lost both of the major cases it brought against him — for tax evasion and skimming casino winnings — when its witnesses were discredited). His reputation led the Israeli government to bar his immigration on the grounds that his very lack of a criminal record bespoke his dangerous power to corrupt officialdom and cover his tracks.

Lacey — the British chronicler of the Saudi and English royal families and of the Ford Motor Co. — amassed 86 pages of source notes (ranging from FBI files to extensive interviews) for his meticulous debunking of the many myths of Lansky's life and of the notion of "organized crime."

Lacey's well-documented thesis is that crime is intensely local and specialized, rather than an integrated network of illegal enterprises funded by a worldwide gambling and drug empire. Lansky and his fellow Jewish and Italian gangsters between 1900 and 1960 were independent family businessmen, a parodic version of their bourgeois counterparts who were busily assimilating on the right side of the tracks. Their "organization" was at most a loose confederation of local bosses who met periodically to settle turf wars or handle common threats, he writes. There was no national criminal board of directors for Lansky to chair; his career as a gambler, bootlegger and



FROM "LITTLE MAN"

casino operator was that of an entrepreneur, not a corporate chieftain.

Setting the record straight doesn't get in the way of Lacey's own narrative talent, however. "Little Man" is a compelling story, full of gems such as these:

Lansky was initiated into the wise-guy world as an 11-year-old on Manhattan's Lower East Side in 1914, using the nickels his mother gave him for household needs to play craps instead.

The anatomy of protection for Lansky's Hallandale, Fla., gambling operations from 1945 to 1950 is described in detail: City officials' friends and relatives festooned the casino payrolls; local farmers were paid top dollar for their produce for the casino dining rooms; the local police escorted each night's take to the bank — and the armored car transporting the cash was owned by the sheriff's brother.

Lacey's ultimate conclusion about Lansky: He had honor among thieves. Lansky's relative success (before Castro's expropriation of his Cuban hotel effective-

ly wiped him out) as a bootlegger and casino operator was based on his personal integrity and ability to manage complex shareout arrangements in his head. "Not intelligent, but wise," in the words of his Israeli lawyer, Lansky earned the trust of his partners and customers in running "illegal enterprises whose enduring success depended on being honest."

Lansky's glamour came entirely from his milieu and the popular culture's creation of urban desperadoes to replace vanished Western folk heroes such as Billy the Kid and Jesse James. Lacey's unsparing portrait reveals an otherwise ordinary man of modest talent, banal taste and stunted emotions, who failed at every legitimate enterprise he tried and who devastated the lives of his wives and children.

For once, a reporter has printed the facts, not the legend, to paraphrase John Ford, and the results are just as entertaining and far more enlightening. ■

Michael Stern, a former journalist and English professor, is a Palo Alto lawyer.