A Cherubic Crook

Morris "Red" Rudensky sitting in automobile once owned by Al Capone. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

Where are all the lovable rogues? Literature is full of them: Don Juan, James Bond, Lisbeth Salander, Scarlett O'Hara, Tom Jones. But in real life, digging into the lives of such bad boys and girls quickly reveals that most of them are simply jerks.

Consider, though, Morris "Red" Rudensky, who was born Macy Motle "Max" Friedman in New York City in 1898 but later changed his name to confuse law enforcers. He spent the first 35 years of his life as a petty thief of bagels, apples, and line laundry who dangerously hardened into an expert safecracker (his skills learned from a Minneapolis mentor named Swenson) with a record of murder, mail theft, armed robbery, and prison escape. He eventually ended up in the Leavenworth federal prison, where the guards considered him unusually foul-mouthed and uncooperative.

There's nothing charming in that, but Rudensky underwent a profound change at Leavenworth after meeting another prisoner, Charles Ward. [See *Minnesota History*, Fall 2015.] Serving a 10-year sentence for narcotics trafficking, Ward impressed Rudensky as strong and smart, and the safecracker built a friendship with him. Ward convinced Rudensky to develop skills and qualities that would allow him to end his life of crime.

When Ward was released from prison in 1924, he joined the St. Paul firm of Brown & Bigelow, a printer of calendars and other promotions. (Company cofounder H. H. Bigelow, a fellow ex-con, hired him there.) Ward promised to similarly bring Rudensky into the company upon his release. Rudensky did not emerge from prison until 1944, but Ward honored his promise and gave the now-ex-safecracker a job as a copywriter. Rudensky called Ward his patron saint.

Rudensky refashioned his life as a Good Samaritan, mentoring troubled boys, entertaining kids and elderly people as a clown, and befriending many of St. Paul's police officials, attorneys, and judges. He even served on the city's crime commission. In the mid-1960s, he became a spokesman for 3M's line of burglarproof locks, and he delighted in demonstrating how easy it was to pick the competition's products. Eighteen years after publishing his memoir, *The Gonif* (Yiddish for "thief"), Rudensky died in 1988 at the age of 89. (His lock-picking tools are now in MNHS collections.) To the end he remained a cherubic, even lovable, rogue.

—*Jack El-Hai*

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