

BOOKS CLEVELAND HISTORY

A mobster with flair

Author recounts the colorful life, and violent death, of Shondor Birns

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The intersection of West 25th Street and Detroit Avenue is one of the most gentrified in Cleveland. A boxy luxury apartment building takes up most of the block, where well-off millennials pay upward of \$1,500 per month to live near the newly created neighborhood of Hingetown.

Most in this shiny new Cleveland are probably unaware they're on ground where one of the most dramatic crimes in Cleveland history took place, on Holy Saturday 1975.

It was at this spot — then a gritty hub of strip clubs and dive bars and hustlers — that infamous gangster Alex “Shondor” Birns, 69, was blown to pieces in his Lincoln Continental after a night drinking at Christy’s Tavern, a seedy go-go joint he frequented.

The explosion in the parking lot was so violent it shook St. Malachi’s across the street and sent parts of the unfortunate mobster into the chain-link fence, while Easter Vigil celebrants rushed onto the street to see what was happening.

Birns died instantly, blown in half.

It was a dramatic ending, but not altogether unexpected in a town soon to be known as Bomb City USA, thanks to a vicious mob war that resulted in 37 bombings in Cuyahoga County, with 21 in Cleveland in 1976-77. Birns’ former acolyte, later enemy, the equally infamous Danny Greene, was himself a bomb victim on Oct. 6, 1977.

LARGER-THAN-LIFE GANGSTER

Birns’ extraordinary death capped an equally wild life, both the stuff of legend. Author Rick Porrello, retired Lyndhurst police chief and author of “To Kill the Irishman,” “The Rise and Fall of the Cleveland Mafia” and “Superthief,” tells the twisting story of the life and death of Cleveland’s larger-than-life gangster in his new book, “Bombs, Bullets & Bribes: The True Story of Notorious Jewish Mobster Alex Shondor Birns” (Next Hat Press, \$18.95).

“It was a natural sequence after ‘To Kill the Irishman’ to write this,” says Porrello. “I saw Shondor as the bigger-than-life character that Danny Greene met, then I started realizing that it was Shondor who came first. He was a mentor to Danny Greene.”

Birns’ many public escapades as a leading figure in the local numbers gambling scene — or “policy,” as it was called in the black community — were well documented in the newspapers at the time.

“For a half century, Alex (Shondor) Birns has been a major Cleveland numbers racketeer who was once described as ‘the city’s Public Enemy No. 1,’” Rosemary Kovacs wrote in The Plain Dealer at the time of his death.

“Birns, often described as a dapper extrovert, a mean street fighter with a penchant for flashy clothes and lovely women, had been arrested more than 50 times since 1925. But convictions were rare,” said the article.

But Porrello goes beyond the headlines in his fascinating book, which presents Birns as a multifaceted family man and immigrant who could be fiercely loyal one minute and vicious the next.

“He wasn’t a good man, but he was a multidimensional figure, we all are. He was a father and friend — many people considered him a loyal friend.”

Birns had been on Porrello’s mind since he wrote his last page on Danny Greene in 2001.

“I thought he had great potential for a great story,” Porrello said. “Since he was a child, he had great struggles and was involved with crime his whole life. He had to struggle his whole life.”

‘A TOUGH KID’

He was born in 1906 in what was then Austria-Hungary. The Birn family, as they were called, fled the Old World for America in 1907, seeking a better life and political stability. They settled in the East 55th Street and Woodland Avenue area, a thriving Jewish community.

As a young boy, Shondor was known as a “tough kid with smarts,” writes Porrello. In 1920, a tragic bootlegging accident that took the life of his mother made him grow up quickly. By the time he was 20, he had already done a stint in the Navy, and the Ohio State Reformatory.

His trajectory was set. For the rest of his



Shondor Birns, left, is shown with Elijah Abercrombie in 1957 after a jury couldn’t reach a verdict in a case charging Birns with blackmail in an attempt to control the local numbers racket. *Karl J. Rauschkolb, The Plain Dealer*

life, Birns would find himself mostly on the wrong side of the law. He was usually to blame. But in one of the most compelling chapters of his life, Birns found himself nearly deported for something he had no control over — where he was born. Birns, always patriotic and proudly Jewish, sought to enlist in World War II.

Not only was he rejected multiple times due to his criminal background, he was also singled out by the Alien Registration Act. His citizenship had never been naturalized (and never would be).

CRIMINAL RISE BEGINS

Not only could he not fight, but he also was sent to an internment camp in Oklahoma with plans for his deportation to a country that no longer existed. Eventually, he successfully fought the deportation, surprisingly with the help of Cleveland Press Editor Louis Clifford. But it was a threat that would hang over him his whole life.

After the war, Birns’ criminal rise began in Cleveland. Unlike Italian mob boss John Scalish, who preferred to keep out of the limelight — and thus out of jail — Birns thrived on attention.

“He always liked the spotlight, which was unusual for a criminal,” Porrello says with a laugh. In addition to prewar bootlegging, running numbers and working for the Maxie Diamond empire, he was a major figure in the Cleveland nightlife scene, owning portions of the famous Theatrical Grill and running the Ten-Eleven Club at 1011 Chester Ave. and the Alhambra Tavern in the long-gone Doan’s Corners district. He was a regular at all of them, working the room and shaking hands from his regular table.

It was an altercation at a nightclub, in fact, that led to his first murder charge, in the slaying of bouncer Randy Duncan in 1934. As with most of the more serious charges in his life, he beat this one — as he later would with the murder of Mervin Gold in 1963.

Like many a famous gangster, it would be tax and financial crimes that would cause Birns the most legal problems, as well as bribery.

ALWAYS IN THE PAPERS

Porrello details all of the nattily dressed mobster’s ups and downs and crimes and misdemeanors with great flair and vintage photos, befitting the colorful mobster.

“He was a criminal celebrity,” he says of Birns’ omnipresence in Cleveland for more

than half a century. “He was constantly in the papers in the ’70s. In the ’30s and ’40s, he was Public Enemy No. 1 in town, and one of the most arrested Cleveland mobsters.”

Porrello also delves into Birns’ unsavory personal life, in which he alternated from doting husband, father, Doberman lover and charitable donor to violent womanizer.

And though he doesn’t discover anything new about Birns’ murder, the detective puts together the known pieces in an intriguing new fashion, pointing the finger at the Hells Angels as well as Danny Greene.

“It was like having a thousand puzzle pieces to put together,” says Porrello. “Putting that puzzle together, it wasn’t just Danny Greene. There was a lot more going on; one of the assassins may have even been there when the car blew up. ... This for me was a very important puzzle piece to the story.”

A BLOODY ERA FOR CLEVELAND

“Shondor Birns is Bomb Victim” proclaimed the huge headline in the March 30, 1975, Plain Dealer.

“Alex (Shondor) Birns, Cleveland numbers racketeer, was blown to bits at 8 last night seconds after he entered his car parked behind a West Side bar,” said the article by E.J. Kissell and W. Joseph Campbell.

“The car was parked in the lot behind Christy’s Lounge, the former Jack & Jill West Lounge, a go-go spot at 2516 Detroit Ave. NW. ... Police speculated that the car’s ignition may have been wired to several sticks of dynamite.

“Detectives also said they feared a gang war might erupt over Birns’ death, either for control of Birns’ numbers empire or for revenge.”

They were right. The next two years would be some of the bloodiest in Cleveland history as mob warfare tore apart the city. Today, nary a shadow remains of that gritty, violent time. The past has been paved over — literally in the case of West 25th and Detroit, where that cookie-cutter apartment building that could be in Anytown now sits.

But Rick Porrello is determined to keep the memories of those wild Cleveland days alive. In addition to his new book, he’s working on miniseries treatment about Cleveland’s most notorious mobster.

“Shondor would have loved the attention,” he says. “He loved it when he was alive. He’d sit down and talk with reporters and buy them a drink. He liked the coverage — though he wanted good coverage, of course.”

COMING UP

Book talks and signings

Author Rick Porrello has several “Bombs, Bullets & Bribes” events lined up. His books are also available at area stores and Amazon.com.

Today, 3:30 p.m.: Book signing at Mac’s Backs, 1820 Coventry Road, Cleveland Heights.

Thursday, 6:30-8 p.m.: Book signing at The Bookshop in Lakewood, 15230 Madison Ave.

Monday, Jan. 27, 7 p.m.: Book signing at Quintana’s Speakeasy, 2200 S. Taylor Road, Cleveland Heights, facebook.com/events/2186650594976444/.

Wednesday, Feb. 5, 7 p.m.: Cleveland Stories and book signing at the Music Box Supper Club, 1148 Main Ave., Cleveland, musicboxcle.com/event/rick-porrello-2/



Shondor Birns was killed in 1975 in an explosion that tore apart his Lincoln Continental near West 25th Street and Detroit Avenue. *Charles Harris, The Plain Dealer*



Shondor Birns was known as a dapper dresser who enjoyed being in the spotlight. *Cleveland Press*

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