

SEARCHING SING SING FOR MY FATHER

Harry N. Gold, Inmate # 76577, Sing Sing Prison, 1924-1930

By Robert L. Gold

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I was almost forty years old when I found out my father had been in prison. It came from a conversation I had with my older brother in April of 1970. After an estrangement of ten years, we met in Manhattan and spent three days together in the city walking and talking. On the last day, while strolling in Central Park and talking about our parents, my brother, Mike, told me he believed that our father had served a prison sentence before I was born.

My father's time in prison – in Sing Sing Prison as I would later learn – was not something my brother could speak about with certainty, but rather something he suspected; his suspicion came from a vague childhood memory of visiting him in prison. Michael, eleven and a half years older than I, thought the visit had taken place when he was about five years old. Unsure if he remembered accurately or perhaps suffered a disturbing dream as a young boy, he never dared broach the subject with our father.

Certainly, it could have come in a dream, confirmed in later life, since Mike himself had been in prison for sixteen months. A navigator on a B-17 shot down over Germany during World War II, he had been imprisoned in a Stalag, north of Berlin. When my brother came home from the war, we slept in the same room and I recall his anguished dreams often accompanied by screams and sweating.

After our conversation, I resolved to learn if my father, in fact, had been in prison. I was always close to my dad and knew, however difficult the answer might be for him, I could ask him the question. Two weeks later, when I visited my parents, I asked Dad if he had been in prison and learned the truth.

At first, he denied it. I asked him after dinner as we were throwing a baseball back and forth in the backyard. I remember he shook his head and said, "Where did you get that idea?" I told him about Mike's memory and he shook his head again.

But, on a long walk we took the next day, Dad admitted he had lied. Although almost thirty years ago, I recall exactly where he told me the truth. It was beside an enormous oak tree whose

roots had pushed the sidewalk up where we stood, only a block from the second-floor apartment where my parents lived in Staten Island.

I can see it all now, as I saw it unfold in front of me so many years ago. We were walking along side by side when he stopped abruptly and turned to me. Looking into my eyes, Dad said without a pause, "I'm sorry, son, I lied to you yesterday. I served five years in Sing Sing for armed robbery."

And then, in one of life's unforgettable moments, I asked him why he had never told me about his time in prison. "Because I was afraid I would lose your love," my father said softly, looking off into the distance.

This reply, that still brings tears to my eyes, emerged from the tight-lipped mouth of a tough, Humphrey-Bogart type man, whose sense of masculinity never allowed more than a handshake with his sons. I still can picture him standing there facing me, his light blue eyes peering at me from beneath the curved brim of his gray fedora. Dad, a slender sinewy man even at 71, had a lighted Pall Mall cupped in his hand.

When I said, "That never would have happened," I remember he reached out and squeezed my shoulder. And, then, we continued our walk without any more mention of prison that day.

Although I didn't know it then, at the end of the sixties, my father had less than a decade left to talk to me. By early 1977, arteriosclerosis had stolen his mind. I not only lost my dad, I lost the only person who could tell me about his life in prison.

In the years that followed until his death in 1981, he told me little else about his life in Sing Sing and I, fearing I might hurt his feelings, spoke of it no more than two or three times. I remember what was said, but not when or where we talked. I know there were many other moments when I wanted to inquire about what Dad did in prison and how he spent his sentence of five years, but I simply didn't have the heart to open up the subject or ask the questions. I probably was right not to probe into what must have been painful memories for my dad, but all my life I have regretted the lost opportunity to know what happened to him in Sing Sing.

Eventually, I did discover the reason for the robberies that lead to his incarceration. My father told me he had robbed to pay off gambling debts he owed the New York City mob. Knowing him, his explanation was easy to both believe and understand.

A life-long "losing" gambler, my dad was constantly in debt to shylocks and the Household Finance Company. As a child I well remember living in dread of an HFC moving truck arriving at

our rented apartment to take away our furniture. No such truck ever arrived, but I never stopped worrying about it until years later when I was in college.

Dad also borrowed money from other gamblers, friends, family, and anyone else foolish enough to loan him anything. I once saw a long list of his debts in a small notebook he kept in his bedside table and there were two pages and at least sixty names written in his bold handwriting. Beside each man's name was the amount of the debt and the date it was borrowed. Despite all my father's good intentions, I think he rarely, if ever, repaid the loans.

With the exception of his mother, who would have given him her last dollar, he never borrowed money from women. As a man's man, that was not permitted within his personal code of behavior. But Dad had no such scruples about asking his sons for money and, over the years, he must have "borrowed" hundreds of dollars from me and thousands from my brother.

We always would give him some or most of what was requested unless Dad told us he was in a "swindle." Then, we gave him all he needed. Though Mike and I never discussed it with each other, we knew "swindle" was his word for money he had taken out of the cash register where he worked. It was, of course, money Dad lost playing cards or dice and had to be returned to the register. My brother and I understood the swindles (borrowed money) was theft, even if only temporary, well before we learned with certainty that he had been in prison.

We both suspect my father "borrowed" money from wherever he worked, but we don't know if he ever got caught, as they say, with his hand in the till. I do know, in the early sixties, he was let go by Macy's, where for years he had been a popular and productive salesman-manager of the hobby department. My dad said it happened because he had argued too strongly against the reduction of sales people in his department. But I doubt that explanation, especially since Dad was always a loyal employee who worked well beyond what was required or requested of him. I believed then, as I do now, Dad was fired for some "swindle" he didn't return soon enough.

In the twenties, threatened with a beating and broken legs if his loan wasn't satisfied, my father became a stick-up man, as he termed himself, in New York City. Despite many fictional stories describing the murder of welschers, gangsters typically used fear or physical punishment to collect their debts. There was no sense in killing someone who owed them money, especially while there was still the possibility of payment. As a petty welscher, Dad feared the beating and broken legs, not his murder.

I don't know the amount of money he owed the mob, but it must have been much more than he could borrow or take from a till. It was obviously even more than he could ask from his mother. Without any other sources of money to settle his debt with the mob, my dad decided to rob retail stores in New York City. When I was told the story, he never spoke of his fear or desperation; Dad simply said, "I had no money to pay them off, so I went into the city and stuck up some stores." I think he said they were clothing shops.

At the time, my dad and his younger brother, Al, known in the family as "The Kid," operated a store purchased by my grandmother in the tiny village of Ossining, New York. Called Fannie Gold and Son Confectionary, it was one of those stores, so typical of those times, that sold candy, ice cream, magazines, newspapers, sporting goods, stationary, tobacco products and toys. A soda fountain made the store popular with the teens who attended high school across the street. According to what my cousin, Marian (Al's daughter), remembers her mother saying, the Ossining business was bought "to keep Harry out of trouble." Ironically, the new store stood on Croton Avenue, only several blocks from Sing Sing Prison, where my father soon would be incarcerated.

Although Dad never described how he went about his robberies in New York, I assume he took the train to Grand Central Station and then rode the subway to lower Manhattan. He did not own a car and never would have paid a taxi to take him downtown.

I know little about the robberies themselves. According to the terse description my father gave me, he simply had walked into several small retail stores, pulled out a pistol, and robbed them at gunpoint. I do not know the number or names of the stores he held up. Eventually, Dad was captured, but I never heard exactly how or where it happened; my father said only that he was arrested amidst a robbery and surrendered without a struggle. Since he said nothing about it, I doubt Dad ever fired the pistol.

I remember only a few more details of the events that led to his conviction and imprisonment. My father told me he got a light sentence because he was a veteran of World War I. He had been in the navy serving on the *Antigone*, a troop-transport ship carrying American soldiers across the Atlantic to the trench-war in France.

I do remember him telling me that my tough old grandmother, Fanny, who called her favorite son, "Mein Harry," hired the most expensive attorney she could afford to defend him. It was assumed the "most expensive" would be the best attorney. I have no idea where my grandmother got the money, but she found it somewhere, no matter what sacrifice was required.

Her sacrifice for him is not surprising, knowing what she had done to support her two sons when my grandfather, Mechel, died of tuberculosis in 1910. For years, in all weather, she stood at a street-corner kiosk in New York selling candy, cigars, cigarettes, daily newspapers, and magazines. She stationed herself downtown near an office building in the financial district and stayed there thirteen hours a day, six days a week. Not only did my grandmother provide for her family's everyday needs, but, by 1922, she somehow had saved enough money to buy the store in Ossining.

Despite her triumphs over adversity, which I had heard about all my childhood, I disliked my grandmother. I saw her as cold and foreboding, a man-like woman, who seemed devoid of affection. I can't recall her ever kissing or hugging me. What I do remember was her sneer and contemptuous "Who you?" whenever I dared argue with her. Hearing those words, I can remember gritting my teeth to keep from saying I hated her.

I disliked my grandmother, most of all, because of her verbal abuse of my mother, whom she had no hesitation saying was not good enough for her Harry. Although my mother stood by him through all the Sing Sing years, countless numbers of gambling losses, and who knows how many of his swindles, she never earned my grandmother's approval. And, whenever my mother dared speak her mind, she too got the hated "Who you?" from the old woman. Dad, however, could do no wrong, even though his endless gambling cost my grandmother thousands of dollars and at least one life-savings I heard about.

I don't know if, before his arrest, my father re-paid any or all the money owed the mob, but I doubt it. I have a vague memory of him saying his imprisonment absolved him of all the debt that remained. I do know he never again borrowed money from the mob.

When my father entered Sing Sing, it was a century-old prison, opened initially in 1825. It was named after the nearby village of Sing Sing and the Sint-Sinck Indians, who had lived along the Hudson River. The name is derived from earlier words, which mean "stone upon stone." In 1901, the local village, in an effort to disassociate itself from the prison, changed its name to Ossining.

Sing Sing was constructed to replace Newgate Prison in New York City, a twenty-seven year old structure, opening one year after George Washington left the presidency. A state commission chose a site that included a stone quarry, which provided ready materials for the building of Sing Sing and later prison labor.

While it was my brother's memory that made me aware of Dad's time in prison, it was my own memory that made me begin a search to discover something about his life in Sing Sing. It came to me one early morning – I recall the time and date exactly - at 6:33, on July 28, 2000. Awake and lying still in bed for a few moments, before the dogs heard my change of breathing and began nudging me to take them out, the memory suddenly appeared in my mind for no apparent reason. Nothing related to Dad had been in my thoughts or dreams the previous night.

I remembered two autographed baseballs in the top drawer of a dresser in my parents' bedroom in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. I saw them in the mid-forties, before the war was over. I must have been twelve or thirteen at the time because I recall my delight finding a pack of Trojans in the same underwear drawer where the baseballs lay in the back on a stack of ironed handkerchiefs. In that same drawer, there was also an orange Mayfair Tea can containing a few old and, I suppose, rare coins. I still have the tea can.

An old shellacked and yellowed baseball remains foremost in my memory. An avid baseball fan as a boy, I recall my astonishment seeing that the ball was autographed by Babe Ruth and the New York Yankees. The baseball was dated either 1927 or 1929, neither my brother nor I recall which year it was. That unforgettable Yankee team of the twenties, with Babe Ruth hitting sixty homeruns (1927) is still considered by many baseball experts to be the best team ever to have played the game.

In the dresser drawer, there was also a baseball autographed by the New York Giants, but again, neither of us remembers the date written on it. My brother thinks a third autographed ball was in the drawer, but to my dismay, does not recall the year, what team or whose names were on it.

All three baseballs were inscribed, "To Mert," my brother's first name, which he changed to Michael much later in life. The inscriptions were written in black ink across the baseballs in a large half-inch calligraphy. Since the inscriptions did not cover any of the many signatures on each baseball, it seems likely they were written on the balls before the players signed them.

The autographed baseballs, now undoubtedly worth thousands of dollars, are lost. The balls disappeared sometime during the early forties and I do not know what happened to them. My suspicion is that they probably were stolen by one of the boys who coveted them when I showed them off. My brother thinks the baseballs were used and scuffed-up rather than preserved for the future, but that may well be wishful thinking knowing how much they are worth today.

What struck me the morning when I awoke thinking about the baseballs was not their monetary value, but rather their meaning in my father's life story. The date on the Yankees ball coincided with his term in Sing Sing, which never had occurred to me before. As I thought about that coincidence, it also occurred to me that my father, twenty-seven when he entered prison, was a fine athlete (unlike his sons) who played baseball all his youth. The obvious question then came to mind. Could it be that Dad was on the prison team that played the New York Giants and Yankees in Sing Sing?

I started the search for my dad's life in Sing Sing the same day the memory appeared to me. To my astonishment, it soon became apparent that no one in my father's family, including my brother, knew the precise years he had been in prison. Not surprisingly, given the sensitive nature of such a thing, no written record of his prison sentence existed anywhere among our family papers.

Since I was born in September, 1932, presumably nine months after his parole from prison, I had assumed my dad's incarceration lasted from 1926 to late 1931. My brother Mike was a "honeymoon child" born nine months after my parents' marriage in June, 1920 and, since he remembered visiting Dad in prison when he was five years old, I believed I too was a child conceived on a honeymoon – a second and post-prison honeymoon!

Knowing my father received a five-year sentence in Sing Sing and assuming he was paroled in late 1931, I immediately contacted the New York City Municipal Archives to discover the dates of his arrest and conviction. I expected the information would be easily found, but, surprisingly, there was no record of a robbery arrest, trial or conviction for Harry N. Gold in the twenties.

E-mail, postal correspondence and phone calls to the New York State Archives in Albany and Sing Sing Correctional Facility were no more informative. Sing Sing's inmate files for those years, I learned, had been sent to the State Archives. Archivist Jim Folts in Albany sent me a long list of the state's Correctional Facility holdings, but Sing Sing's oldest inmate files were not among them. The prison's admission registers were still available, but could only be accessed by date of conviction, which I did not know.

I next examined the *New York Times Index* for the years, 1922 to 1930, to see if a robbery arrest of my father was mentioned. I was surprised to find a number of arrests for several Harry Golds but they were for burglary, confidence crimes, embezzlement, pick pocketing and fur robbery. There was no mention of a Harry N. Gold arrested for armed robbery. I read all the

related *Times* articles on microfilm, but found none of the arrested men fit Dad's age or description. And none of them had an Ossining home address.

Stuck, I knew a trip to New York was essential for my search. Two months later, in September, I flew up from Florida and spent almost a month in pursuit of my father's life story in Sing Sing.

In Manhattan, I went to the New York City Municipal Archives and looked through the microfilmed Magistrate's Court Minutes for the twenties. Though Leonora Gidlund at the archive had searched earlier without success, I had to study them myself to be certain my father's case was not there. It took two full days and I found nothing, no criminal trial of Harry N. Gold for armed robbery.

A day later, I took the train to White Plains to look in the records of the County Clerk's Office. White Plains is the County Seat and largest city of Westchester County, in which the town of Ossining is located. It occurred to me that my father might have committed his last robbery nearer home, in White Plains, where he was arrested and convicted for the crime. In the Record Room of the County Clerk's Office, I learned the criminal trial book for the twenties was missing and had not been seen for several years.

After my return to New York City, I went to the Lloyd Sealy Library at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I had made earlier arrangements to look at the Lewis Lawes Papers. Lawes, a recognized prison reformer and vocal critic of capital punishment, was warden of Sing Sing (1920-1941) and wrote two well-known books about his reform efforts and experiences - *Life and Death in Sing Sing* and *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*.

I spent most of a day at the Lloyd Sealy Library in the hope of finding information about the exhibition games played between the inmate team and the Giants and Yankees. I also was in search of old issues of the *Sing Sing News*, an inmate newspaper printed in the twenties. There was an outside chance that I might find box scores for the exhibition games with Dad's name listed as one of the players on the prison team.

No newspapers were in the library and I found nothing except a couple of old black and white photographs of the inmate baseball team from what looked to be the twenties. The photos were undated and lacked the players' names. One of them included a man who had a resemblance to my father, but after studying the photograph with a magnifying glass, I doubted the player was my dad. I concluded the resemblance I saw was the result of a wish rather than reality.

The other team photo, which included Warden Lewis Lawes and his young daughter, Joan Marie, also appeared to be taken in the twenties. Near the end of my research at the Lloyd Sealy Library, I quickly looked the photo over and copied it along with the first picture I had found. The copies were of poor quality, but provided the only visible evidence of the prison players of that time. Sing Sing's inmate team was called the Mutual Welfare League Team.

Scrutinizing the second photo that evening, I was startled to see a baseball player who looked a lot like my father. The man in this picture has his physical likeness, not the vague resemblance of the man in the first photograph I found. He is sitting at the end of a row of players and the warden's daughter, Joan Marie, is seated in the middle of the same row. She has the three-lettered MWL (Mutual Welfare League) emblem on her shirt.

The old black and white photo cannot be considered conclusive evidence that my father was on the prison team, but it is at least suggestive. I used a magnifying glass to examine him closely and his facial features, especially his large ears and long nose, look exactly like those I have seen in pictures of my dad when he was a younger man. The way he sits, leaning slightly forward, and clasps his hands together likewise seems characteristic of my father. I recall him sitting in that pose, his face animated as he explained something to me.

His slender build also looks like my dad's. But I would be more convinced the player in the photograph was my father if his distinctive curly hair could be seen and not covered by a baseball cap. A cigarette cupped in his right hand also would have helped me be more certain.

A day later, taking a morning train on the New York Central's Hudson Line, I went "up the river" to Ossining and visited the old prison now called the Sing Sing Correctional Facility. Invited by Superintendent Brian Fischer, I was given a personal tour of the prison, including the site, where the inmates once played baseball against the New York Giants and Yankees, seventy years ago.

From the Sing Sing staff, I was disappointed to discover that the inmate case files for much of the early twentieth century had been consumed in a 1984 fire that burned the old cell block, where they were stored along with flammable paint supplies. No record of my father's life and times in Sing Sing existed; there was not one bit of evidence indicating he had ever been in the prison.

In the Deputy Superintendent's office, there was a drawer in his desk, containing old sports materials and pictures, but I was not permitted to examine them. Sometime later, he did send me a

three-page history of inmate baseball played at Sing Sing. But, by the time I received the history, I had already been in contact with its author, Brant L. Kehn, former First Deputy Superintendent of Sing Sing. Kehn, who recently retired as Superintendent of the Fulton Correctional Facility in the Bronx, not only mailed me his history of Sing Sing baseball, but pointed me toward several other research sites, most particularly the Ossining Historical Society.

Warmly welcomed by Director Roberta Arminio, I spent two days at the Historical Society looking through its Sing Sing materials. Disappointed to find nothing on my father in the society's prison collection, I hoped, at least, to see an account of his arrest in an old newspaper. The Historical Society owns a microfilmed copy of Ossining's *Citizen Sentinel* beginning in 1925 and running all the way through the last century. Surely, I thought, somewhere on some page in an early issue of the *Citizen Sentinel*, I would find one story detailing Dad's arrest, trial or conviction.

I spent hours reading newspaper microfilm and found nothing. There were a number of Ossining men arrested and tried for crimes in 1925, 1926 and early 1927, but no Harry N. Gold. Such news was front-page stuff, whether the crimes were committed locally or in the county or New York City. After searching without any success through the first half of 1927, I ceased reading microfilm because it was obvious that a five-year sentence in Sing Sing would extend well beyond the time of my birth in 1932.

I was baffled, to say the least, when I left Ossining. Why was no mention made of my father's arrest in the *Citizen Sentinel*? Why was there nothing about his crime in the *New York Times* or the Municipal Archives? Why was there no record of him at Sing Sing?

It was as if my father never went to prison. I knew better, of course. His incarceration was well known to relatives on both maternal and paternal sides of my extended family. Once I brought up the subject to them, they were quite willing to talk about what had been a whispered family scandal. My cousin Marian remembers a car ride home from school when she was fifteen, with my father and a man he identified as someone who had been in Sing Sing with him. And, Dad told me about his time in prison, albeit reluctantly.

As my time in New York was coming to a close, I went to see my oldest friend in Oneonta, a small college town two hours from Albany by automobile. I had planned to visit the state archives nearby, but without knowledge of the date of my dad's conviction, there was no point to the trip. An extended e-mail correspondence with Jim Folts, Head of Reference Services at the

Albany archives, made it clear that an appearance at the archive without that date in mind would be a futile effort.

At breakfast in Oneonta, the next morning, my friend, Mike Siegel, another mutual friend, Walter Vom Saal and I discussed my research problems. Walter then made a suggestion that would lead me ultimately to the information I had been seeking. His advice was to inquire about the existence of Sing Sing parole records at the State Archives, an approach I had not considered.

That same day, I e-mailed Jim Folts and inquired about the possible existence of parole records for Sing Sing prison in the twenties. I told him I had exhausted all available sources, which should have yielded my father's date of conviction, and asked him for suggestions. His reply stated there were no Sing Sing parole records in the state archive and said he had "no other suggestions on how to locate the Sing Sing admission date."

About to throw his reply in the wastebasket, I read the next sentence in his note. "However, you are welcome to search through the Sing Sing Admissions Registers if you are ever in Albany." At 6:00 a.m., the next morning, I was on my way to Albany.

The New York State Archives are located on the Eleventh Floor of the Cultural Education Center, on Madison Avenue and off Empire Plaza, in Albany. Altogether, there are 148 total volumes in the collection of Admission Registers for Sing Sing Prison, covering more than a century of admissions from 1865 to 1971. The leather and cloth registers are fourteen inches long and nine inches wide. Each page is entitled "RECEIVING BLOTTER" with "Sing Sing Prison" printed beneath it. All entries and information about the inmates in the early volumes are hand written.

I arrived at the New York State Archives as the receptionist opened its doors. Twenty Inmate Admission Registers were sitting in two piles on a metal library cart near a table allocated to me for research. I had requested Registers for the period beginning in 1922 and ending in 1930.

At nine thirty that morning, I started turning the pages of the first register. By noon, I was looking through the register for 1924 and thinking about a short break for lunch. I decided to finish the year and, fifteen minutes later, I turned to admitting number 76577, December 9, 1924, and saw the written name, "Gold, Harry N." On the bottom of the page, I saw Dad's signature, which changed little over the years. A shiver ran down my spine.

The Receiving Blotter related a few pertinent facts about my father. For first-degree robbery, he was sentenced by Judge Culkin of Bronx County to a prison term of seven to twenty

years in Sing Sing. My dad confessed to the crime and was sentenced on December 5, 1924. He arrived in Ossining four days later, after serving a total of twenty-one days in jail from the time of his arrest, on November 19, 1924, to his incarceration at Sing Sing Prison. His anticipated parole date was set for February 16, 1930 and figured by hand on the bottom of the page.

I now knew my assumption that I was a second honeymoon child was wrong. My father was paroled twenty months before I was born. So much for thirty years of romantic fantasy.

The remainder of the information on the blotter obviously was supplied by my dad in answer to questions from a prison admissions officer. He gave his age as twenty-seven, his religion as Hebrew and his occupation as clerk. He said he was born in New York City, which I knew was not true. Who knows how many times I had heard my grandmother tell the story of her arrival in the United States. My father was a baby in her arms when she entered New York Harbor and saw the Statue of Liberty through a porthole.

Not surprisingly, the relative my dad named as an emergency contact was my grandmother, Fannie Gold; his father was listed as dead. Though neither my mother nor brother were mentioned by name, his marriage was recognized and one child was cited. Dad's local Ossining address (84 Croton Avenue) was included as well as the fact that his mother lived at the same address. The only other information checked on the blotter indicated he had been employed, could read and write, smoked and had temperate habits.

Quickly looking over the few facts written about my father on the Admissions Blotter, I knew why no record of his arrest, trial or conviction appeared in the sources I had seen. He was arrested for armed robbery in the Bronx and, although obviously a borough of New York City, the court records were preserved in its County Clerk's Office, not in the Municipal Archives, where I expected to find them. It had not occurred to me or to the knowledgeable staff of the Municipal Archives that the Bronx or any of the other city boroughs kept separate records from the past.

In the twenties, the *New York Times* also concentrated on news in Manhattan. Stories were written about the other four boroughs, especially Brooklyn, but the most populous borough understandably earned the newspaper's emphasis and reportage. One robbery report in the Bronx, therefore, would be insignificant to the *Times*, when there were hundreds of crimes each month in Manhattan.

There was no mention of my dad's arrest in Ossining's *Citizen Sentinel* because the newspaper first appeared in print in January, 1925, three weeks after he arrived at Sing Sing.

Another paper, the *Democratic Register*, was published in Ossining at that time, but has not been well preserved or microfilmed for research use. In the cellar of the Ossining Historical Society Museum building, it is beige with age and literally in bits and pieces. I started to look through the newspaper, but it fell apart in my fingers.

Once I knew the date of my dad's trial, I phoned the Bronx County Clerk's Office and asked about the existence of a criminal trial for Harry N. Gold, on December 5, 1924. I waited anxiously as my inquiry was eventually transferred to the microfilm room and then held my breath while Steven Kravitz looked through the index. "Yes," he said, "It's here - case number 776 for 1924 - nine pages in all. We can copy it and send it to you for 25 cents a page."

A copy of Case # 776 arrived in the mail three days after I returned to my home in Florida. The case included the Grand Jury's indictment, the trial, held on December 1, 1924, Dad's guilty plea the next day, and his sentencing on December 5, 1924.

The criminal indictment filed by the Bronx County District Attorney, John E. McGeehan, charged my father with four counts in the commission of his robbery on November 19, 1924: robbery, grand larceny, assault, and criminally receiving stolen property. All were designated as first-degree crimes.

My father was arrested in the robbery of \$350, worth almost \$8,000 in contemporary currency, from a Bronx drugstore owned by Charles Dwork. At that time, any crime involving money or goods valued over \$200 was termed grand larceny. My dad was charged with assault because he pointed his "pistol ... loaded and charged with gunpowder and one leaden bullet" at Dwork during the robbery.

In the November 22, 1924 issue of Ossining's weekly *Democratic Register*, later discovered when the date of the robbery was known, I learned Dad had been arrested "after holding up five different drugstores." He was captured "by a cop while making a getaway." The arresting policeman's name was Raymond B. O'Neill.

To my surprise, I read in the *Democratic Register* that my dad had been arrested in a taxi cab which he had hired for his escape. He was arrested after a car chase. His attempted getaway in a taxi made me imagine a slapstick scene out of a silent-movie featuring Buster Keaton or the Keystone Cops. The driver, Henry Bloomfield, was initially held as an accomplice and later released when my dad confessed he had "single-handed held up" the Bronx drugstores.

Even though he was arrested in the Bronx, I still think most of Dad's robberies were done downtown in Manhattan as he told me years ago. Initially, I think he stole money from clothing shops, and, then, decided to rob drugstores assuming they might hold more cash in the till; during Prohibition, many drugstores sold illegal liquor. My father also changed locations and robbed stores uptown in the Bronx, probably because he feared recognition in Manhattan, where he recklessly robbed without a mask of any kind.

The December ninth issue of the Democratic *Register* reported the sentencing of my father to Sing Sing. Judge Francis Dugan Culkin, whom the newspaper mistakenly named "Conklin," sentenced him to "not less than 7 nor more than 20 years" in prison. The severe punishment, the judge explained, was needed because "... at the rate of robberies at the present time the country would soon reach a stage of civil war."

My father's lawyer, William Thomas, made a leniency plea for him on his previous good record and the fact that Dad had been a successful businessman. The robberies were rationalized as the result of my father's racetrack losses; he "turned to robbery" to pay off his debts. Despite the judge's statement that the crime was one "the court must punish severely," the seven-year sentence was not severe for the times, particularly with a good possibility of parole after five years.

I doubt that racetrack debts motivated my father to robbery. As a lifelong gambler, his passion was playing cards and rolling dice, not betting horses. I recall him phoning bookies to bet on baseball, basketball or football, but I never heard him make a bet on a horse race. My guess is that racetrack debts were declared the reason for his robbery rather than mention the mob's gambling parlors, where Dad lost most of his money on cards and dice.

Unlike his arrest and trial, my father's life in Sing Sing lacks written records. Except for the admissions register, which reveals his arrival on December 9, 1924, nothing else survives to tell his story of the next five years. The fire that engulfed the old cellblock sixty years later destroyed all evidence of his existence in Sing Sing. All that remains now is my memory of what he told me the few times we talked about his time in prison.

Dad said he was reasonably comfortable in Sing Sing. He found the guards to be fair and friendly and one would become a fishing friend later when he was paroled in Ossining. The other inmates, in prison, my father reported, were generally orderly and quiet. Many of them were immigrants from Europe who kept to themselves, speaking in their own languages. "No one

bothered me,” he said, and there were few problems in the prison population, controlled by mob inmates.

Dad did not do hard labor in the stone quarry. Instead, I seem to remember him saying he worked inside and handled supplies like sheets, towels and the prison uniforms worn by the inmates. I am not certain what “handling supplies” meant, but I don’t think it involved doing laundry.

Whatever else he did during his time in Sing Sing, I know he read a lot, especially the so-called classics such as *Don Quixote*, *Crime and Punishment* and *Moby Dick*. Dad also liked Horatio Alger stories and later suggested them to my brother. He read nightly in prison. A favorite of his was the *Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, which he recommended to me when I went into high school. Since his reading at the time included Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and pulp fiction like *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*, I was amazed he had read such a book.

My dad spent most of his free time with his cellmate, Jules, whose last name I don’t recall and, rather than eat institutional food, they cooked their own meals and ate together. Jules was a diamond cutter and well educated according to my father. I assume it was Jules who guided Dad to the reading of good literature.

My father told me a story about Jules that stands out in my memory. He said that Jules was the ghost-writer of Lewis Lawes’ popular work, *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*, published in 1932. Dad certainly would have known about it since he was Jules’ cellmate in five of the seven years preceding the book’s publication. In fact, he would have witnessed the writing of the book. While my father often would lie about his gambling losses (He would say he had been mugged in the street or a pickpocket took his salary on the subway), I never knew him to lie capriciously or ever lie to inflate his own importance or that of a family member or friend.

Jules was sentenced to twenty-five years in Sing Sing for a murder. Enraged to learn of his business-partner’s embezzlement of their company’s funds, Jules threw him down a flight of stairs and killed him. I met Jules in the forties, when he was released from Sing Sing and came to Perth Amboy to visit my father. It was on a Sunday and I recall leading him out to the Copper Works, where Dad was shooting craps with several other local gamblers. Not knowing the stranger or his relationship with my father, I was shocked to see the two men embrace, each with tears in his eyes.

What else my dad did in Sing Sing prison remains uncertain or unknown to me. The photograph of the MWL player, who looks like my father, permits me to say that he *might* have

been on that inmate team. Thanks to Ellen Sexton, Reference Librarian at the Lloyd Sealy Library, I now possess an enlarged photographic copy of the team picture and that player has a resemblance, though imperfect, to my dad. Similarly, the baseballs autographed for my brother, Mert, suggest he *might* have had some connection to the exhibition games played between the inmate team and the New York Giants and Yankees, but they certainly do not provide any definitive proof.

In the late twenties, both teams came up from New York City to play baseball at Sing Sing. Hard as it is to imagine in the world of today's sports millionaires, major league players, in the twenties, appeared in exhibition games on their days off to earn extra money. The Giants apparently played an annual game at the prison, but the Yankees were less frequent visitors to Ossining.

On September 6, 1929, not long before the great stock market crash, the New York Yankees did play ball at Sing Sing. Babe Ruth hit three "titanic" homeruns in a game with the MWL team and one was reported to have gone 620 feet from home plate. The ball flew over the center field prison wall, 40 feet high and 320 feet from home plate, continued over the New York Central railroad tracks and landed on a bluff below the prison's administration building; Sing Sing was built on both sides of the railroad tracks.

Unfortunately, no box scores appear in the *Citizen Sentinel's* coverage of the exhibition games. Exploits, like Babe Ruth's long homerun, and well-known major league players are mentioned in the newspaper, but little is included about the MWL team. The same is true of the *New York Times*, which reports on Ruth's record homerun "the longest non-stop flight of an object or person leaving Sing Sing," but makes only perfunctory mention of the "MWL nine." So, I have no way of knowing if my father played on the team or not.

Box scores are in the *Citizen Sentinel* for some of the games played between the inmates and other outside teams visiting Sing Sing. Baseball teams from Ossining, Westchester County, and even the borough of Brooklyn (The South Side Democratic Club) played at the prison all through the twenties. The newspaper box scores for those games do not include Harry Gold in the MWL lineup.

Without at least one mention of him in the *Citizen Sentinel*, I cannot say my dad ever played in an MWL game with the New York Giants, Yankees, or, for that matter, any other visiting

team; I cannot even say he was on the inmate team. I want to believe he played ball at Sing Sing, but, to my chagrin, I cannot prove it.

The three autographed balls, however, suggest my father must have had some connection to the Mutual Welfare League Team. Since they were inscribed "To Mert" before being signed by the New York Giants and Yankees, they suggest that someone on or close to the inmate team got the balls autographed for my brother. That someone obviously had access to the visiting teams to get all the players' signatures on the balls in the short time they were at Sing Sing - before or after the game. The autographed baseballs alone do not prove that my father played on the MWL team, but considered along with the old team photograph, they offer a compelling possibility.

What Dad did in prison and how he spent the five years of his sentence are questions that still remain without reliable answers. Without the inmate files, consumed in the fire of 1984, there is no where else to search for facts about my father and no one alive today who has information about his prison life. Sing Sing guards or officials and fellow inmates, who might have recalled something about his time among them are long gone.

I am left with too few memories and a picture of a player in an MWL baseball uniform who might have been my father. There is nothing else, not even the autographed baseballs from those years.

The search itself, if frustrating at first, was informative and satisfying in the end. I now know much more about the man who was my father. Hard facts have been added to my memories of what he and other people told me about his crimes and sentence in Sing Sing. I also know his gambling, which would lead him to ceaseless "swindles" and five years in prison, was a lifetime fixation. It began even earlier than I had imagined and lasted until the final years of his life.