A Cherubic Crook

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
If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

**Students and researchers**
- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: [http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html](http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html)
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

**Teachers**
- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

**About Illustrations**
- *Minnesota History* credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. *Minnesota History* itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](http://www.mnhs.org/mnhistory).