

boxing

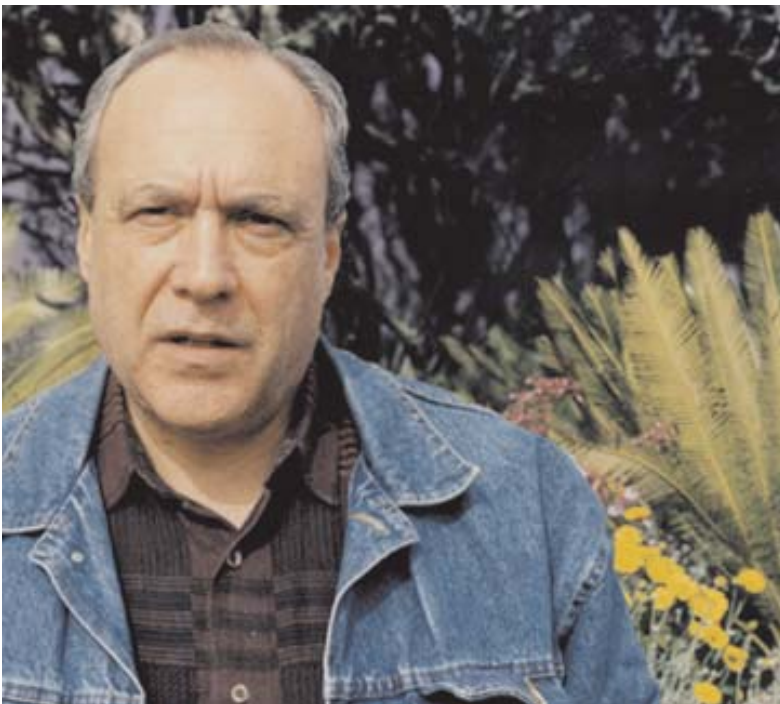
by don cogswell

# TUCSON ALCHEMY

**A SCHOLAR, AN ARTIST, AND A  
SORCERER'S APPRENTICE MINE  
BOXING'S ETHNIC ALLOYS IN THIS  
CAULDRON OF THE SOUTHWEST.**

**B**eryl David Rosofsky, a.k.a. **Barney Ross**, never fought in Tucson, Arizona. Most of his gritty contests, tournaments of toughness, took place in Chicago with occasional sojourns to New York or up and down the West Coast. Desert locales were off Barney's circuit. That didn't keep a flame of passion for this Windy City hard charger from igniting in Tucson resident Mike Mayersohn.

Mike's a New York City native, from the borough of Manhattan, having moved to this Southwestern address in the mid-seventies, via a temporary Toronto dogleg. (Tucson I found out has as few natives as San Francisco.) He's a teaching professor at the College of Pharmacy, University of Arizona and shares an alma mater with Harold Letterman. Barney Ross is his feel good medicine.



Over lunch at the Café Poca Cosa, Mr. Mayersohn's generous treat, Mike explained to me his interest in Mr. Ross. Mike is, and Barney was, Jewish. At the time he turned pro, 1929, fighting in the prize ring, to kosher culture, was considered "a shame and a disgrace". In Yiddish, a *shandeh un a charpeh*. Something to hide from Mama. Beryl Rosofsky took the name Barney Ross to aid in his deception.

Mike said Ross's family misgivings lasted until fame and fortune, in those early Depression years, changed their outlook from lead into gold. Familial pride shined through in a tough Jew in an anti-Semitic time.

Ross went on to win three World Championships; lightweight, junior welterweight and welterweight. His hallmark was remarkable toughness in

Recently at a Bat Mitzvah, in New Jersey, attended by many of my Jewish in-laws, the sweet science came up. **Benny Leonard, Ross, Max Baer**, hell, even **Mike Rossman** was fondly recalled. A cousin-in-law had just interviewed **Dana Rosenblatt** for a Jewish publication. I asked him what he had to say. His first question, "What's a nice Jewish boy like you fighting for?" His father, who witnessed the interview, sadly elaborated, "his nose is still straight, he talks so well." When I regained my composure I mentioned the names of some current non-Jewish fighters in Dana's division. The in-laws drifted off in search of liquid refreshments.



a tough sport in an extraordinarily tough time. He went into the **International Boxing Hall of Fame** in its inaugural year, as a charter inductee in 1990, 23 years after his death.



Mike Mayersohn sketched out the non-pugilist side of the Ross story. Following his final fight, a bad beating and the loss of his welterweight title to the formidable **Henry Armstrong**, Barney entered another trial by combat on Guadalcanal, Starvation Island to the Japanese. Wounded, he became addicted to morphine and wrote of his struggles to free himself of addiction in his autobiography Monkey On My Back. A Hollywood distortion of his book, in the tradition of **Joey Giardello** in *Hurricane*, was voted thumbs down by Ross.

Historian Mike Mayersohn feels Barney Ross, the man known as *The Pride of the Ghetto*, was an All-American hero. Working in part through the good offices of IBRO, the **International Boxing Research Organization**, Mike, a member, is working on deepening that appreciation.



Across from my hotel was a patch of green, surrounded by busy one-way traffic lanes, and featuring a statue of a horse-mounted man in a weathered hat. A retaining wall from the hotel extended out directly across from this island of serenity amid the carbon monoxide mayhem, a vibrant mural filling its large expanse. Atop the wall, touching up its



colorful munificence was a solitary figure just breaking the skyline, only his upper body visible. An extension ladder, pulled out to its full length, rested against his work, falling several feet short of the top. A small pickup truck containing a collection of paints and brushes straddled the sidewalk at the base of the wall. I wrestled with framing the mural within my camera's field of vision without being whacked into oblivion by the vehicular torrent when I noticed the artist in residence was about to descend. I made my way to the base of the ladder and held it steady while he swung his leg over, reaching into the unknown for the top rung and a firm footing. Upon reaching the ground I asked him about the painting at hand.

His name was **Luis Gustavo Mena** and he had been privately commissioned to paint the mural. It represented 500 years of *Chicano* history. His sources, he emphatically stated, were Spanish, Portuguese or Native American, no English whatsoever. A man rooted in his own training regimen. In addition he acted as his own manager and promoter, deciding both landscaping and lighting for his piece de resistance. I asked him about the statue across the street.



It was a gift from the President of Mexico, a larger than life bronze rendition of **Francisco Villa**, Poncho to the Hispanic challenged. Luis added the installation had been resisted by many of Tucson's Anglos, a reflection of their take on Mr. Villa's foray north across the border. **Black Jack Pershing**, in bronze or otherwise, was nowhere to be seen. Luis gave me his take on the sweet science.

He told me that it was the *Indian* blood





in the Mexican and Chicano fighters that gave them their strength, strength of purpose and resolve. Their Indian heritage steeled them into the staunch warriors they so often were in the ring. I asked him his favorite fighter, expecting a vintage **Chavez** or **Chacon**. He admired them but the fighter that rang his bell was **Roberto Duran** “when he fought the Black.”

“**Sugar Ray Leonard?**” I asked.

“Yes, when Duran beat him the first time.”

Leonard was the media darling at the time and his first loss, to Duran, was sweetmeat to Hispanic pride. Luis, a pan-Hispanic with a reach concomitant with

the expanse of his mural, could still catch a whiff of that entrée, always a special up on the big board at boxing’s Hard Knock Cafe.

As I was leaving he asked my name. “Irish?” he queried. And German I replied.

“The Irish fought with Villa and the Germans supplied him with arms.”

With that sweet lullaby whispering in my ear I thought of long-ago San Francisco scribe **Ambrose Bierce**, who at his end had ridden off and disappeared in Villa’s Mexico.

Who could blame him?



**M**ike Mayersohn put me in touch with long time Tucson trainer **Rick Chille**, another transplanted New Yorker, from a section of town called Red Hook, a cultural continental divide from Manhattan. A social milieu Chicago-raised, Depression-era, Ross would have felt right at home in. I asked Rick how he ended up in Tucson.

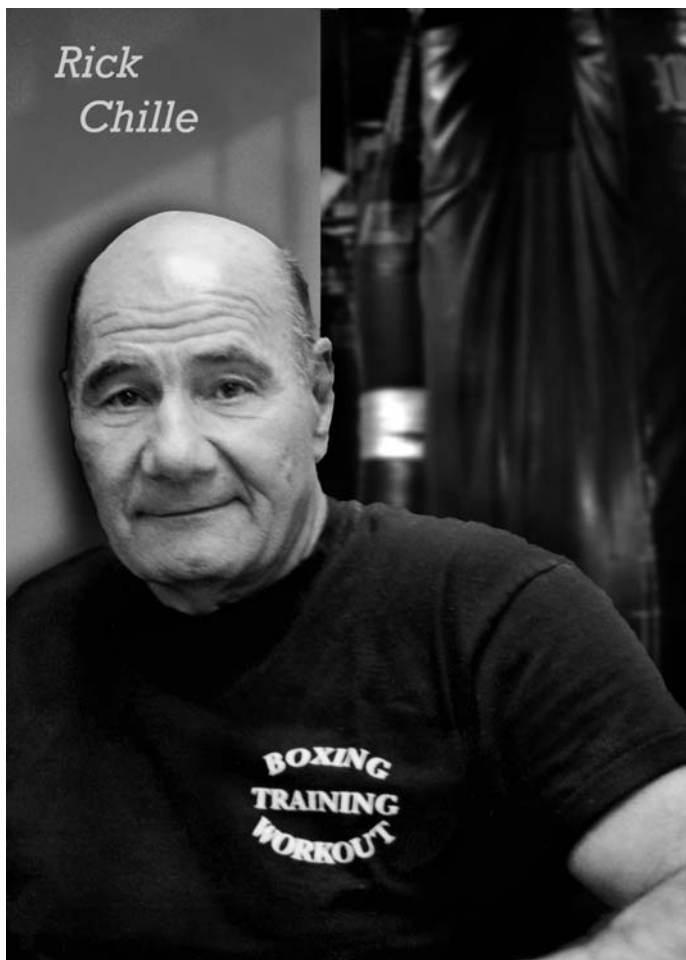
“I came to this town and I was just a fight fan, in '62. I came out from Rome (NY). I was stationed here and I liked it so I came back. I was stationed here in '56, this place was nothing, but it became a hell of a boxing town. I just fell in by accident. In New York you go to the gyms and they just look at you and say sit over there.”

The Mecca of boxing, at that time, was a tough spot to break in. Had he ever boxed himself?

“No, never fought. Put on a few exhibitions, after a while, just for charity.”

How did you get into Tucson boxing?

“One kid was fighting, he ended up killing himself, a good kid; his name was **Ralph Ruelas**, a good fighter. He hung around my brother-in-law, and he told me, why don't you come down to the gym with me. He knew I liked boxing, but, see, there was a lot of garbage going on. In other words he wanted me to look out for him. So I went down, and I'm no... but I saw stuff. So I stuck with the kid, I didn't do this as a business, so I drew people that I thought I could trust. These (other) guys would come in and train for three days and take them to Vegas. So that's how I got started.”



*Rick  
Chille*

The Tucson boxing scene really heated up.

“In the late sixties and early seventies this place was really rockin'. They brought fighters from all over here. A guy named Flores used to promote because his brother was a top dog here. He made a lot of money; a lot of money, never left this town. He was **Paco Flores**. And the first time I saw him, my buddy, see this guy I hung around with promoted, he promoted for years. He's in Florida now, he works with **Dundee**, he's on his own. He has a fighter now named **Charles Whitaker**, from the Virgin Islands.

My buddy, he was the promoter, I was the manager, I had nothing to worry about. Not only was he the promoter, but with other promoters, he was the matchmaker. This guy had a mind. He would say, 'I've got this guy' I would say, 'who is this guy?' He's say 'you watched this guy fight last week.' The names were hard for me.”

I know exactly what you mean.

“I'd see the guy and I'd know who he was. We'd know who to put my fighters with. Some of them



weren't easy. Some of them, you know, but at least I had a half way chance, I knew where I was going."

And then it went cold.

"There's a guy named **Beto Martinez**, he use to go all over, now he's pretty sick. There's another guy **Carlos Madrid**. Actually, it was Carlos Madrid, Beto Martinez, myself and my buddy, **Quinlan**; we were Tucson boxing. Then these guys came in, and all of a sudden, all this money. My buddy said, they brought us a suitcase of money; they want to put a show on. My buddy said, you promote, I'll be the matchmaker."

*Fat Angels.*

"But then these guys, my fighters came to me and said, we're going to go train way over at.... I said, what's the matter? They said they pay you to train. They brought **Lou Duva** in, they had a gym here called *Kronk West*, they brought **Stewart** in. And Stewart and Duva took all their money."

These guys; all they wanted to do was be like another Angelo Dundee. 'I want to be up in the corner'. What for, nobody sees you, they watch the fighter. But see, they had so much money. This guy blew a couple of million dollars."

What was the impact on the local fight scene?

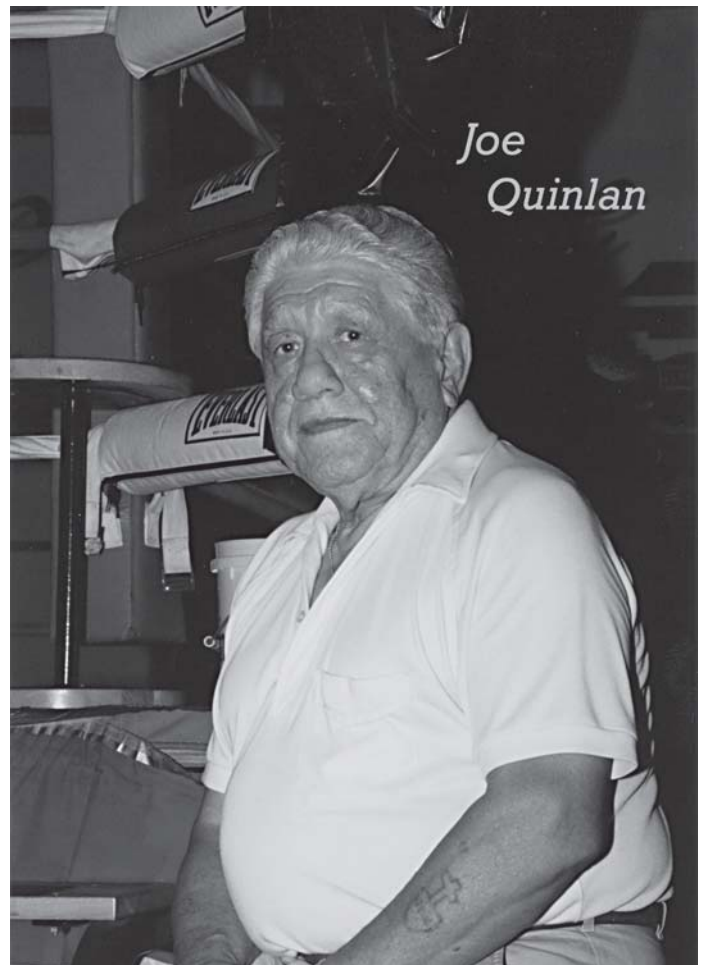
"They beat all the fighters here. I had a light heavyweight; they brought in **Michael Moore** and killed him. So, they brought their fighters in, killed everybody here, then these guys got busted. So me and my buddy, when that happened, we got out of it. Then it all died. It's a shame; they ruined everything in town."

Angels with dubious purse strings, together with boxing's tendency to eat its young, proved toxic to Tucson's slice of Boxiana. Let's talk about the good times.

"My first big guy I worked with was **Ruben Castillo**. I took him to Phoenix for his first or second fight. He fought a guy named **Frankie Ahumada**, I'll never forget!"

(Castillo fought Ahumada in both his first and second fights, KO4 and W6, respectively.)

"I give Ruben credit, the guy that trained him was from here, Beto, and then this other guy, Carlos Madrid, trained him. And then when he fought **Sanchez**, this kid Castillo had five title fights, five, can you believe, how many guys get one.



My buddy was the interpreter for Salvador Sanchez. His name is Quinlan but he's Mexican. **Howard Cosell** says, 'Quinlan, he's the interpreter?'

Thoughts of a Villa connection flashed through the Celtic regions of my cranium.

"But he brought Dundee in and he paid him.

I said, why did you do that for, and he said, 'you know what Rick; I didn't get rid of my guys or nothing.'

I said OK; you can bring anybody you want.

He said, 'I always wanted Dundee in my corner.'

He said, 'he smacked me, that's all he did.' You know, 'come on kid, you gotta get movin'. But the idea that he was...you know."

Now that Arizona professional boxing resides in Phoenix I asked Rick how his white-collar training regimen fills his days.

"When I use to train my fighters, half the time they're in a hurry to fight, they wanted the money, bada bing, bada bop. Half the other time you have other trainers saying, 'don't listen to him.' Everybody's fighting each other. Now, I'll get a person, I have a woman in her 60s, has cancer, her doctor said it helped. She was on chemo, she was on radiation, she came in and hit the bag, a sixty-year old woman. We call her **Kid Telvi**, her name is Telvi.

She comes in and says, 'Coach, I ain't going to hit too hard but I'm hitting today. My doctor says not to get cut.'

I said, what's he know? You ain't gonna get cut.

They come for one hour a week, except one little Italian girl; she was coming once a week the first year.

And then, after that, she said, 'I'm not losing any weight.'

So I said you're going to have to do this everyday and that gets a little expensive but she buys her husband Porsches, and whatever. Wonderful people, so I say, are you sure you want to do this Mary? You aren't going to work the mitts that much; you're going to work that heavy bag. I'm going to work you like I work.

She says, 'I'm all yours.'

She's my prize, she's forty-six, she's been coming in five years. When people come in, seeing her hit the bag, she's a dream."

With their success in learning boxing's basics, do they have the urge to spar?



“Mine had gotten to that, they want it. I put them against me. I have one guy, he’s forty-two years old, and I say, if you were younger I would have made a good fighter out of you.

So he says, ‘I got to test it, put him in a tough man.’

So this guy, he’s a heavyweight, and you can’t work with them under the tough man, I was lucky to get in. They had me doing other stuff but I wanted to be close to him. But I never got close. He was the last guy to fight, never warms up or anything. But I see him coming in cold and he’s fighting this big, tall guy. They call him *Black Mamba*. Ready for this; my boy comes in, he looks beautiful. It wasn’t two seconds; this guy, POW, my guy goes down. But he gets up; he’s running this guy down. He comes back to the corner, I say, you’ve got to stay close, with those long arms. And I’m looking, and I’m saying to myself, he’s out, he doesn’t know a fucking word I’m saying. He goes the rest of the fight, running after this guy, never could hit this guy, the guy ran like a...and he won the fight. And he was embarrassed. I said, Chuck, you did everything. You went in, you got knocked down, you got up, you were out of it, and you won the fight. You don’t understand what that means.

He said, ‘Want does it mean?’

Next year you better do better. And he’s dying to go back.

I put four of my clients in that. The one guy, I could never teach him anything. He’s a sheriff, he loves to just go. He went in, got knocked down, got up, got knocked down, got up, that’s all he wanted. And when it was over, he almost kissed me.

He says, ‘I loved it. That’s all I wanted to do, its over.’

I don’t know if its because they are older but I wouldn’t be afraid to bring any of my clients, in their fifties or sixties, to a gym, people would be awed. If you’re going to pay me to train, you got to do what I want. The patience, I got all the time in the world. No fight coming, no pressure, you’re going to look good on the bag. If you got in the ring who knows what would happen, but I get them going.

I enjoy it, *I love it.*”

*Two weeks later, far from the sunny climes of Tucson, I’m sipping a Glenlivet at a joint called River’s End, atop the cliffs overlooking Jenner-by-the-Sea, where the Russian River meets the Pacific. A raw wind drives an endless series of storms through the California coast. At the end of the bar four hearty men drink ale from tall clear glasses. Everything they say is in Swedish though I have no doubt they speak English. I bide my time before mentioning **Johansson**.*

The powerful currents of ethnic pride, and more recently, age and gender, continue to course through boxing’s veins. (Noted Philadelphia boxing historian **Chuck Hasson**, who served a residency in Red Hook, is re-indexing his extensive library of combatants in recognition of this fistic fundamental.)

“No, I will defend my title...against all comers, none barred. By this I mean white, black, Mexican, Indian, or any other nationality, without regard to colour, size or nationality...if I am not the best man in the heavyweight division, I don’t want to hold the title.”

**Tommy Burns**, in answer to a reporter’s question if he would draw the colour line, after winning the Crown from **Hart**, February 23, 1906.

