

## **John the Barber**

**By Pete Ehrmann**

The obituary of John J. Reisler in the September 16, 1930 New York Times said that the man who'd briefly managed Jack Dempsey 15 years earlier "always was proud of having known and handled Dempsey before he was champion."

The feeling wasn't mutual.

"...A man completely twisted with hatred and rage," Dempsey wrote about Reisler in his 1977 autobiography. He also called him "a shifty character," "a vicious person," "poison," and said, "I hated his guts."

Dempsey fell into Reisler's clutches after he hoboed his way to New York City from Utah in 1915. Dempsey's friend and manager Jack Price came along, but Reisler got rid of him with a phony telegram that said Price's mother was dying in Salt Lake City. Then Reisler told Dempsey that Price sold him his contract, and tried to match him with Sam Langford and other big name heavyweights Dempsey knew he wasn't ready for. Finally Jack agreed to fight veteran John Lester Johnson and had several ribs stove in over the course of 10 tortuous rounds, after which John the Barber gave him \$100 of the \$500 Dempsey had coming for the match.

Dempsey slunk back to Utah. A couple years later when he was heading to the top under the management of Jack Kearns, Reisler hounded them with lawsuits charging breach of contract, right up to Dempsey's 1919 championship fight with Jess Willard. According to then-sportswriter and later-TV variety show host Ed Sullivan, eventually Reisler took \$10,000 to go away.

In his checkered life as a boxing manager-promoter, Broadway impresario, wheeler-dealer, gambler, inventor, mobster and proprietor of Gotham's most ITALICde luxe barbershop, the long list of people involved with the man called "John the Barber" who wished he would go away — or, better yet, that he'd never entered their lives to begin with — included even members of Reisler's own family, though at the end apparently his wife and son forgave him for driving them to cold-blooded murder eight years earlier.

That happened when Minnie Reisler, the Barber's wife of 29 years, and their son Morris, put an end to Reisler's 12-year affair with Minnie's much younger and prettier sister Bertha Katz on July 26, 1922 by breaking down the door of her Brooklyn apartment and putting four bullets in her. Minnie claimed that her late father had come to her in a dream and ordered the hit; but since it was 24-year-old Morris who pulled the trigger, he did the seven-year stretch in Sing Sing for second-degree murder. (It would've been two counts had Morris heeded his



mother's exhortation to save a round for "the old witch" in the bed next to Bertha's — their aged mother.)

John the Barber's shortcomings as a family man first went on public display in October 1910, when he told a judge in York City's juvenile court that his sons Max, age seven, and George, five, were "entirely out of his control" after they were arrested for stealing money from stores in their neighborhood. Their MO was to enter a shop and ask the clerk for a drink of water. While the clerk was out back getting the water, the boys opened the cash register and start grabbing.

According to the detective who pinched them, George "generally took the money from the (register) as he was so short that even if the shopkeeper did look around he would hardly be able to see George's head over the counter." The judge sent George home with his father. Max went to the NY Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

A decade later Max called himself John Reisler Jr. and was a good enough featherweight prospect to be talked about as a potential challenger to champion Johnny Kilbane. That ended on January 14, 1921 when his fight with Bobby Michaels at the Garden underneath the Benny Leonard-Richie Mitchell lightweight title bout was so suspiciously putrid Referee Patsy Haley disqualified both of them. John Jr., managed by his father, was suspended, and Haley's name was indelibly inscribed on the Reislers' enemies list. He ascended to the top of it five years later when Haley declared Billy White winner on points in a fight with Junior. The Reislers were so nasty and threatening towards Haley he complained to the state boxing commission, and at a hearing on January 12, 1926 the Barber and Junior were handed a 60-day suspension. They left the hearing room first, and when 49-year-old Haley came through the door 23-year-old John Jr. whirled around and sucker punched him in the face. Despite the Barber's threat to "expose the whole boxing game" in New York if the commission punished his boy further, Junior received a lifetime ban.

It was lifted a few years later, and meanwhile Junior fought elsewhere, mostly losing. A rare victory against Jackie Jones, whom Reisler knocked out in seven rounds on July 29, 1926 at San Bernardino, California, resulted in Jones' death from a cerebral hemorrhage. Seven months after that Reisler Jr. was back in the news when he fought Billy Richards in Sydney, Australia. At the end of 15 rounds the referee held up Richards' hand, whereupon Junior went nuts and "struck the official, punching and wrestling with him until attendants could pull them apart" (New York Times). He was deported from Down Under the next day.

John the Barber's notoriety predated his involvement in boxing. In July 1912 he saw gangster Bridgey Webber run away after shooting gambler Herman Rosenthal dead in Manhattan. But at the coroner's inquest, reported the New York Times, Reisler took the witness stand, looked out "into the frowning faces of the prisoners' friends ... turned white" and denied having seen anything. After spending a night in jail for perjury, Reisler recanted his recantation.

"An odd type along the so-called Rialto of the city," said one article of Reisler, "speculating in anything from seaside concessions to theatrical productions." Supposedly the Barber once struck it rich in the Oklahoma oil fields, but lost it all backing lousy plays and other pipedreams. Once Reisler was arrested for speeding in New York City and told the judge he was actually on his way to see him when pulled over by the cops. "Here I have plans of an invention to prevent skidding and speeding, and I was in a hurry to tell you about them," he said from the dock. "If you will look at my automobile standing downstairs, Your Honor, you will see this wonderful appliance adorning my machine."

"I don't care anything about your inventions," said the judge. "You started out to see me — well, you did. Twenty-five dollars or 10 days in jail."

If he'd invested all his time and energy in the trade that gave him his nickname, today the name Reisler might be revered in tonsorial circles as that of Gucci in the fashion game.

"The hundred and one gadgets he introduced into his barbershop are still providing the visiting firemen with surprises," wrote Gilbert Swan in 1930 about The Mayfair, the grandiose Manhattan gents' parlor launched by John the Barber the year before.

"All The Mayfair manicurists came from the stage or the movies," reported H. Allen Smith. "They are blond and brunette, and pretty little redheads, plump, and slim, and every one is very shapely. John picked them with care. He sent them to school for 11 weeks, to learn the art of paring cuticle. And when they had earned their diplomas, he bought them pajamas — crimson and purple, and black and white, buttercup yellow and jade green, sky blue and rosy pink. And he gave them each a cunning little chair to sit in, and high-heeled mules to wear. And if ever, in all your life, you saw more decorative manicurists, you must have been dreaming. John's idea was to combine barberism with whoopee."

(Nice, but I actually prefer an earlier Reisler innovation that somehow didn't catch on: a barbershop staffed by mutes.)

Ironically, it was hair that did the Barber in. Just one, actually, ingrown on one of Reisler's fingers. It became infected, and when trying to pound the gangrene out didn't work, he died.

A fitting epitaph was written years earlier by Morris Reisler, who after his prison stint for killing his dad's paramour became a career criminal known as "John the Barber's son":

"My father could have been a multi-millionaire time and again if he had dealt right."

**\*\*\*\*\* This article originally ran on BOXING.Com March 5, 2017 \*\*\*\*\***