

The Krays: A Violent Business

The Definitive Inside Story of Britain's Most Notorious Brothers in Crime

Colin Fry



About the Author

Colin Fry was born in Hillingdon, Middlesex, an identical twin like Ron and Reg Kray. He worked in the film and music industries, appearing in the Oscar-award-winning film *Patton*, before turning to writing. His other books include *The Kray Files* and *The Krays: The Final Countdown*, and he wrote *Doing the Business* in collaboration with Charlie Kray.

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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In memory of my twin brother, Rod

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George Burns once said I have written six books. Now that's not bad for a guy who has only read two! If you don't know who George Burns is or was, then check him out on the Internet or elsewhere, and if you don't then shame on you. Having the chance of writing a book is something that doesn't happen too often to too many people. I have been fortunate in that respect, since this is my fourth offering and it is once again all down to the patience of Bill Campbell at Mainstream Publishing in Edinburgh. The fact that I have only read a few books in my lifetime is neither here nor there.

My wife Eva has, as usual, kept me supplied with coffee and sustenance during the small hours, and my children, Alexander and Christian, have always been on hand to bring me back down to earth. Now, that is something that they really are good at, and anyone with children will know what I mean.

I would like to thank Rod, my twin brother, for reading through my chapter on twins some time ago. I know it was a pain, but his efforts were much appreciated. Likewise, my mother has always encouraged me with my work. My brother and my mother are now no longer with us, but their memory lingers on, just as my memories of the Krays have not faded through the years. With so much in the press and on television almost every day, it is not easy to escape my past in any way.

Friends, too, have been supportive of my new profession. Lalit Bagai in Denmark and Charles Rosenblatt in Florida in the USA have always given me the best pragmatic advice based on their long years in business. Thanks to you both.

Newspapers have always been an invaluable source of information, although not exactly reliable for investigative

endeavours, and the Internet is proving itself a tremendous source of all kinds and types of useful knowledge. These two sources in particular, coupled with my own intimate knowledge of the Krays, have helped me greatly in the early stages of my investigations. Sifting through the inaccurate and sometimes misleading stories becomes simply a habit, but then this is the stuff of legends and make believe plays its part in creating the imagery of the celebrity.

But we must not forget the academics who gave this book a new interpretation on the Krays. Some time ago, I contacted Professor Chris Jenks at Goldsmiths College in London, where he is head of the sociology department. He has written a paper entitled 'The Kray Fascination', and I have regularly referred to this work within my own text. Also, Tim Trimble, who previously lectured in psychology at King Alfred's College, Winchester, was invaluable in the psychological analysis of the background material. Without their guiding framework, this investigative work would have been almost impossible. Other academics include Dr Dick Hobbs, previously of Durham University, now at LSE, with whom I share a book title, *Doing the Business*, and Audrey Sandbank, a family psychiatrist with TAMBA, the twins society. Thanks for the help; it was outstanding and led me in all directions, enabling me to build up the big picture that I was aiming at.

Thank you all for helping to ensure that *The Krays: A Violent Business* is a well-balanced and in-depth analysis of the Krays.

PREFACE

I first met Charlie Kray back in the early 1980s, when I was in England working in the record business. One evening, in a public house somewhere in London, I made acquaintance with this jovial character who was telling stories of the old days and entertaining the girls with tales from far and wide, including the USA and Canada, Spain and Germany, Switzerland and Nigeria.

But what really got my interest was when he said he had twin brothers. Being a twin myself, I was naturally interested. 'What do they do?' I asked. 'Where do they live?' The reply was a little shocking. He told me that his twin brothers were both in jail for murder, but that he thought they would be out soon.

After I wiped the gin and tonic from my tie and shirt, I continued with my questioning. 'But you are in the music business, aren't you?'

He smiled as he answered. 'Yes,' he told me. 'I used to manage a band called Stray, but nowadays I run the bodyguard business set up by my brothers. We look after a lot of celebrities and rock stars, even Americans.'

I was intrigued. But how could I approach the subject of his twin brothers without getting a punch on the jaw? So I bit the bullet and asked the obvious question. 'Just who are you and who are your brothers?'

Charlie looked me in the eye and smiled. 'You don't know who I am, do you?' he asked.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I don't live in England any more, so I don't read the newspapers or see television. I just found your stories interesting.'

Charlie smiled again and breathed a sigh of relief. 'Well, I'm Charlie Kray,' he said at last. 'And my brothers are

Ronnie and Reggie.’ He looked at me again. ‘You still don’t know who I am, do you?’

The look on my face must have said it all. I didn’t know who he was or who his brothers were, so I waited. Charlie then relaxed, and we had a good chat about his brothers. This was the first time I had ever heard of the Krays. But after that evening I knew a lot more.

We kept in touch and met up regularly in London during the mid and late 1980s, and I helped him out with a few business deals that he was negotiating. Everything was fine, and then he asked me if I would like to get involved in a new book to be written about his life and that of his brothers. There had been a film made about his brothers, and accordingly there was a terrific demand for a book written by someone in the family.

I first got involved in the film *The Krays* when Charlie asked me to help deal with the liquidators, Cork Gully, when the film’s distributor, Parkfield, got into serious financial trouble. Charlie was afraid that he and his brothers wouldn’t get paid, and Charlie needed the money. I knew he had already sold off his royalties to the film, and I was keen to help in any way I could. It was, after all, possibly the only way I could get the money back that I had lent him through the years. I knew that I was only one among many, but I gave him the benefit of the doubt and loaned him the money – after all, he was ‘Champagne Charlie’ and a genuinely likeable villain.

So I took a break from writing our book about Charlie, the twins and their dealings with the American Mafia and had a few meetings with Cork Gully at their London offices. They were very helpful and polite and all appeared to be going well, although there was a huge amount of paperwork to go through with regards to the actual procedures that Charlie Kray had secured for the payment of their royalties. There was no hue and cry at the time about murderers receiving dirty money for the sale of their story; no one appeared to

mind. So I just got on with the task of trying to secure the Krays their payout.

While I was investigating their business dealings with Parkfield, I spent a day with their old pal Joe Pyle at his office at Pinewood Film Studios. I used to live nearby in the village of Iver, so for me it was like coming home. Joe made me very welcome and together we checked out the contract that Charlie had negotiated for the film. After some time we settled on an approach, all legal and above board, although Joe did suggest that there was another way – the Kray way.

Joe enjoyed being at Pinewood, with his office just across the road from the James Bond set, but shortly afterwards he was sent to prison for cocaine smuggling. So his association with the film business was short-lived.

Charlie and his brothers finally got their money, so the Krays were happy. But it was not so happy for those, including myself, who had invested time and money in Charlie. By the time that Charlie had got his hands on the cash, well over £100,000, it was all gone again. It turned out he had sold his royalties over and over again, so all I got for my troubles was a little something to cover some of my costs. Ultimately, though, I was happy to get something back.

A few months ago I was asked if I would like to write another Kray book by Bill Campbell of Mainstream Publishing, who had previously published some of my work. As I had already written three books, I wondered at first if there was really room for a fourth but then I agreed and told him, 'This time I will include everything that I wasn't allowed to write previously.'

How many times have I heard the words, 'I don't think we should mention that, some of the people involved are still alive!' I heard it when talking with Charlie in his home, I heard it when visiting Reg in prison and I heard it when I met Ron in Broadmoor.

So why write another Kray book?

After the release of *Our Story* by Ron and Reg, Ron was offered a lucrative new book deal. The deal was done and the money paid, but Reg insisted that his name be kept out of the book because he didn't want his homosexuality coming to light. Ron eventually decided that it was all just too difficult; he couldn't write about his twin brother who was so secretive about his life, he couldn't write about certain activities that Reg thought were too sensitive, and he couldn't talk about the other killings.

Reg believed that any mention of other murders would keep him in jail forever, and he couldn't understand why his brother would even contemplate doing that to him.

Admitting to new murders could also have caused serious problems for elder brother Charlie, who was commonly known among the members of the Firm as the 'undertaker'.

And there was the story of Ron's relationship with Peter Sutcliffe, otherwise known as the 'Yorkshire Ripper'. One particular incident between the two men hastened the downfall and eventual death of Ron Kray. Reg didn't want the truth coming out about that and could not believe that Ron would shame the Kray name by making the story public.

Ron ran the Kray Firm with his twin brother Reg, aided by elder brother Charlie. They are the best known of the UK's home-grown gangsters, rivalling Jack the Ripper for the number one spot in the annals of UK criminal history. This book tells you everything they didn't want you to know and, in some cases, what no one dared to ask.

For Lords and Ladies, gentlemen and celebrities, villains and plain hangers-on theirs was a fatal attraction. The gloves are now off with all three Kray brothers dead and buried and NO holds are barred. Let the truth be told at last.

INTRODUCTION: THE EARLY YEARS

For as long as anyone can remember, there have always been gangs in and around the East End of London. It was here that immigrants first made their home in the city, and it was here that the different communities tried to defend their cultures, their languages and their rights as they saw them.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the area had a huge working-class population, and it was overcrowded and dirty. People were poor and lived in filthy conditions. Boozing, fights and prostitution were everyday events, and there were numerous brothels. In fact, crime was rife, with rape, assault and robbery endemic. There was rubbish and excrement everywhere, and some of the excrement was actually used locally in the tanning houses around the docks. Compared with the West End of London, it was another world. With poor street lighting, it was always a dark night for villains, reminiscent of a scene out of a Dickens novel or one of the stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, with Sherlock Holmes just about to solve a crime.

The area was heavily industrialised, with factories of all kinds offering piteously low wages. There were glue factories, slaughterhouses, soap plants and coal bunkers located just to the north of the docks, which were themselves thriving at that time. There were breweries from which the stench of hops and yeast wafted on the breeze and spread throughout the East End.

It was not by coincidence that the factories were located here. They were placed to the east of the West End of London because the rich people of that area didn't want the smells and the riff-raff that came with them. The wind was predominantly from the west, so the rich could spit in the wind and see it carried to the East End, only to land on

some poor immigrant who couldn't afford to complain about it. The only smell they wanted in the West End was the smell of money.

It was, quite naturally, here that the first real London gangs appeared. There were the Odessian and the Bessarabian gangs, who worked their trade around the Whitechapel area made famous, or should that be infamous, by Jack the Ripper. They preyed on Russian immigrants in the area. People also had many other gangs to fear, such as the Blind Beggar Gang, who worked out of the pub later made famous by Ron Kray in 1966 as the place he shot and killed George Cornell. There were also the Titanics, the Hoxton Mob and the Vendetta Mob, but these were all just collections of pickpockets, small-time thieves and the like, who gave themselves a collective name just to gain some respect in the East End.

Before the First World War, the gangs were predominantly made up of members from the same ethnic groups or nationalities – the Jewish gangs, the Italian gangs, the Maltese gangs and so on. All gangs had a limited sphere of operation, a small territory to defend, and were only concerned with defending what they already called their own. There was no ambition, no intent or desire to take over a larger territory and definitely no grand plan in their schemes.

That all changed after the war, with groups of so-called 'families' emerging, made up of different races and different ethnic cultures, and their main concern was money.

The first major crime syndicate was the Sabini Brothers. They had brought their ideas from Sicily, from where they originated, but they had married into various other groups, especially the Irish, and this blend of Italian and Irish thinking had evolved into the biggest gang of its time. Their home turf was an area of London called Clerkenwell. The Sabinis were around for more than 20 years, often importing criminals from the 'old country' to carry out crimes in

London and especially to help protect them from their main rivals, known as the Elephant and Castle Mob.

Crime was only one of the things that kept them together, however. They were also held together by class, culture, location and family. Most of their fights were territorial conflicts that took on a violent nature right from the beginning. It was all about family business and protecting their rights, both old and new. In reality, they had taken their attitude towards crime directly from their own past and adopted the old warlord structure from the country of their birth, Sicily.

Their main opponents were other rival gangs from around the Hackney area of East London. They were always trying to muscle in on the Sabinis' money-lending operations, which were very successful, but the best business to be had was at the racetrack, where they protected illegal bookies.

Charles 'Darby' Sabini and his gang worked Epsom and Brighton racecourses in the main, going further afield when the opportunity arose and the money was right. All bookies at that time ran stalls out in the open, and they usually held a lot of cash during a meeting. When 'Mad' Frankie Fraser, a future enforcer in the Richardson gang, was ten years old, he worked for the Sabinis at Epsom as a bucket boy. His task was to wash the chalk from the bookies' boards that showed the odds on the horses. It was as good a start in life as any, and he got a taste for it. The bookies were always in need of protection and the Sabinis obliged with weapons and their fists. Their main weapon was the cut-throat razor, and the Sabinis were very skilled at using this particular piece of armoury.

Because of their activity at the racecourses, where most bookies were Jewish, the Sabini gang took on Jewish gang members to control the business, and they were very good at it. In fact, their business continued to flourish up until the Second World War, when life as people knew it changed for ever. It was said at the time that the Sabinis would even

bribe the police to keep other gangs away from their business, but we will never know for sure.

The Sabinis had the power and they had the money, but then they ran out of steam and a power vacuum developed. They were eventually replaced by another family, known as the Whites, who came from Islington in North London.

Like the Sabinis, this was another family who didn't appear to want to get involved outside of their own particular territory; in fact, it was left to their successors, Jack Spot and Billy Hill, to try their hand at gaining a foothold on crime throughout the city, and especially the West End.

Initially Jack Spot, real name Jack Comer, worked with Billy Hill to take over crime in London. They even called themselves the 'Kings of the Underworld', a title they had earned as they controlled most of the crime in London at that time. For some reason, however, they fell out, and Jack Spot had his face slashed one evening in Soho, in the West End.

Spot needed someone to help him restore the balance of power in gangland, so he hired the Kray twins to protect him and his reputation. For some time there was stalemate, but one night in May 1956 Spot was attacked, on the orders of Hill, outside his flat in Bayswater by 'Mad' Frankie Fraser and a lad known as Alf Warren. That was it for Jack Spot, who retired and bought an antiques shop. Billy Hill also took early retirement and moved to the Costa del Sol in the south of Spain.

Reginald Kray was born on 24 October 1933 at eight o'clock in the morning. Some ten minutes later, he was followed by his identical twin Ronald.

Their parents, Charlie and Violet, were overjoyed at having twins. They already had another son, Charles junior, born on 9 July 1926, seven years before the twins, and the young Charlie didn't know what to make of the new arrivals.

'They can see right through me,' he told his pals. Gradually, he began to feel isolated, as everything Violet did was centred on her twins. Things had changed for the young Charlie, and he knew it.

There had been another baby born previously to Charlie and Violet. The girl, born in 1929, had been called Violet, like her mother, and she was a joy to behold but died when only a baby. This was common in those days, with diphtheria, pneumonia and tuberculosis rife throughout the country.

Early on, the family lived in Stene Street in Hoxton, but in 1939 they moved to Vallance Road, Bethnal Green. This was still the East End and it was still overcrowded. It was a small terraced house with no bathroom, although there was a toilet located in the back yard. Maybe there were even a couple of cats.

At that time the area was a ghetto, pure and simple. There were brothels, gambling houses, seedy pubs and billiard halls. Everyone drank, and all the men boxed in one way or another. After all, with the high unemployment in the area there was not much else they could do.

Ron and Reg were only five years old when their father, old man Charlie Kray, deserted from the British army. At the start of the Second World War, in 1939, he had been conscripted into the Armed Forces, but he was more intent on serving himself than his country; even his family came off second best.

Charlie Kray senior had been an able fighter, like all the Krays before him. Their pedigree went back to the bare-knuckle fighting days; they were proud and let everyone know it. But he wasn't interested in his country, only in his own well-being. And that meant staying a free man and not stuck in some army barracks in the back of beyond or, even worse, facing German troops in Europe. All he wanted to do was to travel the south of the country in search of anything from clothes to gold and silver to sell on at a profit. He

worked throughout the south, even travelling as far afield as South Wales. He was often away, and he liked it like that.

When he did come home, the twins were roped in to help keep their father out of the clutches of the local constabulary and away from the front line. On one occasion, the twins hid their father under the dining table when the house was searched by the police. When one elderly policeman glanced at the table, Ron said nonchalantly, 'You don't expect to find him there, do you?' They continued to search the house but didn't look under the table. Another time the twins hid him in a cupboard, again with great success.

For six long years, during a crucial period in the twins' development, Charlie senior was on the run and generally not at home at Vallance Road. Their mother, Violet, and Aunt Rose who lived nearby took on all the parental responsibilities, and they cherished and nurtured the twins into adolescence. It was this mother-son relationship that was to dominate their lives and the only one who could influence Ron and Reg was Violet. They idolised her and always took her side in an argument against their father, no matter who was right and who was wrong. They would protect their father, all right, but not at the cost of causing their mother any harm. She wanted them to take care of their father, and so they did, not because of any affection they may have had for him – not in any way. It was simply because of a promise to their mother.

From the very early days, she would call the twins 'special'. Violet also considered herself to be special, since no one else in the neighbourhood had twins. People would stop her in the street and gaze in amazement, and friends would come around to the house to ask if they could take the twins for a ride in the pram. This was glamour in the eyes of Violet Kray; it made her feel different, just like her two lovely sons.

When the twins were three years old, they fell ill with diphtheria and were separated and kept at different hospitals. Violet saw them both every day, and after three months Reg was able to come home to Vallance Road. Ron was still ill, however, and doctors were not predicting much of a chance of survival. Violet took matters into her own hands and brought Ronnie home, saying, 'I know my boys best. He misses his brother.' She was right – after all, a mother knows best – and soon they were both out playing in the street, happy and contented.

Their brother Charlie had witnessed the care and attention devoted to the twins by his mother. He was now in second place, with the twins firmly positioned on top of the heap. Exactly how this made him feel is not well recorded, but I bet he hated it. His mother treated them like royalty, pandering to their every wish, while Charlie had to take on part-time work outside school hours and help his mother with the chores around the house.

In 1940, the Kray family was evacuated to Hadleigh, a little village in Suffolk. Young Charlie loved it there and so did little Ronnie and Reggie. Unfortunately, Violet missed her friends and family from around Vallance Road, so, after a year in the country, the Krays moved back to London and the old neighbourhood. The children hated being back, away from the green fields and tranquillity of Suffolk, but home they were and home they had to stay.

Their father was still on the run and watching him having to hide from the police must have had an effect on the young twins. It undoubtedly contributed to their hatred of authority of any kind and, almost from day one, the police had been their sworn enemy. Why should the twins talk to them? Why should they trust them? Why should they believe them? This antipathy toward the police became a kind of code. They made up their own rules and punished anyone who dared break them. This ideology of sorts was to stay with them all their lives. It influenced their way of

being, their actions and their thoughts; indeed, it even culminated in them killing people. Killing, to the Krays, was the ultimate punishment for not playing the game according to their rules.

‘We’ll take care of ourselves and we’ll put no trust in the law,’ was the order of the day; Ron and Reg lived by that code and, eventually, they would both die by it.

Being wary of the ‘Old Bill’ was a way of life in the East End. Everyone knew a rogue or two, even an out-and-out villain who could get hard-to-come-by goods at a fraction of the usual price. This was a normal occurrence in this socially deprived area of London, where the working classes did not have the spending power of their West End counterparts. Buying something out of the back door or from the boot of a car was an almost everyday event. This had always been the case in the East End and became even more so after the Second World War, when the twins were growing up in Bethnal Green. It was a time of opportunities for them, and they quickly developed their independence in the blitzed ruins of society.

The twins were always keen to fight. If they couldn’t find someone to have a fight with, then they would fight each other. They were not cheerful children, not by any means. In fact, they were serious most of the time, with the one continually trying to outsmart the other. They had their own way of sharing things, but it often came to a fight to determine who would get his way. In general, it was Ron who came out on top. He would urge his brother on, only to knock him down. Even at this early age, Ron knew how to control Reg, and, remember, Ron was the younger of the twins.

Even when their parents argued, Ron and Reg wanted to join in, always taking their mother’s side in any row. They didn’t know their father very well, even after the war, since he was still a wanted deserter. With all the years of buying and selling all over the south of England and Wales before

the war and trying to escape the police after the war, old man Charlie Kray really didn't know his sons.

Young Charlie was a teenager now and, with his dad still on the run from the army, he took on the role of man of the house and the responsibilities that his father would normally have pursued. He was very interested in boxing and taught the twins to box, later advising them to turn professional and make a living from the sport. He encouraged them to fight, even fighting on the same bill with them later at the Royal Albert Hall. He did all an elder brother should. But he could not entirely replace the father that the twins so desperately needed.

At the age of 14, he took a job at Lloyd's in the City, working as a messenger. It was a full-time job, and it took young Charlie and his bike all over London. At nights, he would still box, using makeshift punchbags and other gym equipment that he had scrounged, but then he contracted rheumatic fever and everything was put on hold for a while. As soon as he was fully recovered, he joined the Naval Cadets, where he could train properly. Charlie was serious about boxing and getting fit, and it showed in everything he did, even in his cycling around London. He certainly wouldn't let a little thing like rheumatic fever stop him.

Soon afterwards he joined the Royal Navy, and then all his training really paid off. He regularly boxed for the navy at welterweight and won many a championship, taking his trophies home to Vallance Road. Ronnie and Reggie could just stare at the trophies, sitting up high on the mantelpiece. To the twins, they were the stuff that dreams were made of. But Charlie started to get migraine attacks and soon he was back home for good, receiving an honourable discharge from the navy on the grounds of being unfit for duty.

Without any true guidance from their father, and with Charlie junior being away, the twins made up their own

rules and their mother encouraged them; after all, they were special.

Whether or not their father, old man Charlie, would have made any difference to their lives at this time is debatable, but there are good psychological grounds for saying that families without a prominent father figure have more problems with their male offspring than those with a so-called normal two-parent family. This does not mean that single parents always have problems with their children, but it does mean that the chances for trouble are increased. That, unfortunately, is just a way of life, and it can be verified statistically.

So, to summarise, the twins had no father figure. They lived in an environment where going to the police for help was frowned upon. They were constantly hiding their father from the police, and they were continually running foul of the law because they lived by their own rules and not by the law of the land. This was a recipe for disaster.

When the twins were eight years old, school began again in the East End of London, but the twins didn't take to the education system very well. They were always fighting on the old bomb sites with one gang or another and soon had their own bunch of followers. The Krays always led from the front; they never followed. Of the two, it was Reg who did better at school, but Ron got his own back as soon as school was over. They soon became known as the 'Terrible Twins'.

Reg liked to have his pals around him, but Ron was a loner, often preferring to take his Alsatian dog, Freda, for walks among the bomb sites, hoping to find something he could use or sell. But both of the twins loved to listen to the radio, and their favourites of the day were *Dick Barton* and *Just William*.

By the time they were nine, the twins knew how to handle the law. Their street, Vallance Road, was called 'Deserters' Corner', and the Lees (Violet was a Lee) were everywhere. There was Aunt Rose, Aunt May, Grandfather Lee,

Grandmother Lee and many more all dotted along and around Vallance Road, and the twins used to go from one house to another through the open doors or through the back yards. When the police came to call and their father was away, the twins would tell them that their parents were divorced and that their father didn't live there any more. Aunt May's husband was also on the run, so too were many friends of the family. Grassing to the Old Bill was a real no-no.

When their father did make it back home for a weekend, he often took them over to see old fighter friends across the river, pals who made a living as pickpockets and small-time crooks. He filled their ears with tales of conflict and of violence, completely different to the bedtime stories they had from their mother and Aunt Rose. The twins lived in a paradoxical world: full of love on the one hand and full of hate on the other.

Reg would always remember one particular day when he was eight and playing with a pal called Tommy in Bethnal Green. They were messing around, not doing anything in particular, just walking around chatting and laughing. Tommy suddenly nudged Reg and pointed out a bread van parked by the kerb with the driver further up the street delivering bread. Just for fun, Tommy and Reg jumped up in the van and played at driving cars. Tommy then saw that the keys were in the vehicle, and he took a chance and turned the key. What happened next was to remain with Reg all his life.

As he turned the ignition, the van lurched backwards. Unknown to the boys, it had been left in reverse gear. They heard a cry and a crunching sound, so they sprang from the van and went to the rear to see what had happened. A young boy lay dying in the street, knocked down by the van as it reversed.

For many weeks afterwards, Reg expected to hear the police knocking on the door, but no one came. There was an

inquest and a verdict of accidental death was pronounced, but Reg and his pal Tommy were never questioned. From then on, Reg Kray knew that violence and death would be a way of life.

Every year there was a fair in Victoria Park. The twins would go with Grandfather Lee, with their dad Charlie scowling in the background, as he was still a wanted man. They loved the fights, with blood and sweat pouring off the fighters. The most interesting part of the boxing was when one or more of the local lads got into the ring to fight one of the main boxers who had been hired to fight all comers. The twins watched and waited. Soon it was their turn.

‘Who’ll be the next?’ asked the ringmaster, as one poor soul was carried from the ring. ‘There’s a fiver in it.’ He looked around the marquee; no one was taking him up on the challenge.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Ron, only 11 years old but ready for the big time. The ringmaster looked at him and started to laugh. He couldn’t see who he could fight as he was so much lighter than the ‘professionals’. The crowd began to laugh, and it all got too much for brother Reg.

‘I’ll fight him,’ said Reg, getting into the ring. The crowd were ready, and the twins didn’t let anyone down. They bruised each other, gave each other bloodied eyes and noses and generally tore one another to pieces. Eventually the ringmaster had to call a halt and call it a draw. Ron would have kept on fighting, but the crowd had had their money’s worth, and he reluctantly decided to call it a day.

Their father had seen it all and was pleased with his boys as they were living up to the fighting Kray and Lee names. Their family history was full of prizefighters, drunkards and small-time rogues; Charlie was happy to see that the twins had inherited something that he could be proud of.

Violet, on the other hand, was fuming when she heard about the fight, and she made Ronnie and Reggie promise not to fight each other ever again. They promised their

mother and from then on they would always fight on the same side, often against authority in general, but more often than not against the police in particular.

Their first real piece of trouble came when they were 12 years old. There had been skirmishes with the law before but they were now put on probation when found guilty of firing an airgun in a public place; even at this age they were both interested in guns. But probation meant nothing to them, and they carried on as usual with their gang fights, which became more and more intense. They would both use shards of glass or knives or chains, anything they could find to use as a weapon, and they would never stop when they had their opponents down. This was just the way it was. Get them down and keep them down was the order of the day.

At 16, they bruised and bloodied a young lad from another gang, using chains and bars. But there were witnesses who saw the wicked deed, and the police became involved. At the magistrates' court they were remanded in custody accused of grievous bodily harm and sent to the Old Bailey for trial. However, the witnesses were soon scared off with promises of beatings and other sordid threats, so the police were unable to convict them. Even the lad they had beaten was encouraged not to give evidence; it just wasn't done in the East End of London since it broke one of their oldest codes. 'You don't grass,' he was told, so he didn't. And the Krays got away with it.

At the trial, the judge remarked, 'Don't go around thinking you are the Sabini Brothers!' When Ron and Reg Kray got to meet 'Darby' Sabini some years later they had a good laugh recalling this outburst. They didn't think they were the Sabini Brothers; they knew that they were much, much better than the Sabinis could ever have been.

Only a short while later, they were in trouble again. The twins were hanging around Bethnal Green Road on a busy Saturday afternoon chatting to some pals when a young policeman, PC Baynton, approached and told them to move

on. He didn't just tell them, he decided to shove one of them, hitting him in the stomach. And that someone was young Ronnie Kray. Just why he acted in that way when they were only out for a stroll can only be a matter for speculation. But Ronnie took offence to being shoved, especially in front of his friends, and punched the officer in the face. That was it. He was carted down the station, leaving Reg wondering what had happened.

Charlie junior rushed down to the police station as soon as he heard about the incident, and what he saw didn't please him at all. Ronnie's face was in a real mess, bruised and bloodied all over. 'What the hell's going on?' Charlie screamed at the officers near the cell. The officers were still sniggering and taunting Ronnie, but Charlie soon put an end to that by telling them that he would get a lawyer if they didn't stop. They did. Charlie then told them that he was taking Ronnie to see a doctor, and the two of them walked out of the police station with no one trying to stop them.

Reg wasn't a happy young man. He felt that he had let his brother down, so he searched all afternoon for PC Baynton. When he found him, he punched him in the face, just like his brother Ron had. He then casually went home and waited for the law to catch up with him. When they eventually came for him, Charlie told the police not to do what they had done to Ronnie or the Kray family would sue for damages. Reg went quietly, and that evening he sat in the same cell that Ron had occupied earlier in the day, but no one came near him.

The only thing that saved them at the trial was their good reverend, Father Hetherington, who said that it was all out of character for the twins, who had helped him in the past on numerous occasions. Despite the magistrate praising PC Baynton for his courage in such a cowardly attack, he put them on parole and the twins once again walked free. This was to become a bit of a habit throughout their lives, although they didn't beat the courts every time. They did

what they wanted to do and in the main they got away with it.

Very soon, the twins were involved in hijacking lorry loads of cigarettes and furniture; they began dealing in stolen goods and were diversifying into all kinds of criminal activity. The more they got away with it the more they wanted to do, and so it escalated until the killings of Cornell and McVitie. The seeds were now sown.

1

YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU: PRIVATES ON PARADE

That was a funny time when Ron and I were in the guardhouse. We both went to see the officer on this particular day and we were cuffed together. There was a Captain sitting there who was reading some papers, or was making out to, and Ron saw a cup of coffee. So he leaned over and picked it up and drank it in front of the escort. The Captain went mad. He said, 'Take him out, take him out!' Ron looked at him and then gave it to him straight. 'You greedy bastard,' he said. 'I only wanted a cup of coffee!'

Reg Kray

In February 1952, the postman delivered two important letters to 178 Vallance Road in Bethnal Green. They were addressed to Ron and Reg Kray and the twins looked at them for a while before opening them. When they did open the letters, they looked at each other and said nothing. There wasn't really much to say. Violet reached over to see what it was all about and then she gasped. Her little boys had just received their call-up papers; they were wanted in the army.

In the early part of March, Ron and Reg put on their best identical suits and took the bus to the Tower of London, where they were to be enlisted into the Royal Fusiliers. They had little difficulty finding the place since it was the same regiment that their father had deserted from all those years earlier. He had often told them the story of his great escape.

A corporal took control and they were soon outfitted with their uniforms and various bits and pieces. After a light meal they were ready, with a bunch of other raw recruits, to be shown the ropes, and the corporal spelt it all out, by the numbers. The twins weren't used to being told what to do

and certainly not how to do it. The barracks were bare and tasteless, typical army grey. They didn't like it.

The twins listened patiently for a while, but the corporal was beginning to get on their nerves. Without saying a word and without motioning to each other in any way, they slowly walked towards the door.

'And where do you think you two are going?' asked the corporal, not used to anyone walking out on him. After all, these men were now in the British army.

The twins stopped and turned round. They looked at each other, but said nothing.

'Well, where are you off to?' he asked again, not believing his eyes. He looked first at one and then at the other. Was it Ron or Reg, or Reg or Ron? He couldn't tell the difference.

'We don't like it here,' said Ron. He could have said 'fuck the army' but he chose his words carefully. 'We're off home to our mum,' he added as they both turned again to face the door.

At that moment the corporal grabbed at the twins. He obviously didn't like anyone walking out on him, especially two at a time, but he had overreacted and the answer from the twins came swiftly.

Suddenly the corporal was on the floor, knocked out cold. Just who had hit him was anyone's guess but there were plenty of witnesses in the barracks. The twins had won the argument, so they went home to mum for tea, just as they said they would.

Later the following morning they were picked up by the police at Vallance Road and taken back to the Tower. They caused no bother and went quietly. Once there they were delivered to the Military Police and thrown into the guardroom, so they could spend the rest of the day in deep meditation. But the Krays were prepared. They knew what they were doing, all right. They may have been only 18 years old but they were smart, streetwise and not to be messed with.