



Ruby with strippers: 'Little cupid with a little grin' UPI

'I GOT PRINCIPLES'

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It was as if Damon Runyon had written the last act of a tragedy by Sophocles. The most unlikely nemesis of all time was 52-year-old Jack Ruby, born Jack Leon Rubenstein, a "street-smart" operator who toggled out his fantasies in the Al Capone panoply of white-on-white shirts, triple-ringed hands, and snap-brim fedoras. Ruby, born to nothing in the ghetto of Chicago's West Side, ricocheted through a pinball destiny until he fell into place, master of the grubby revels for the bravos and backslappers of Dallas night life.

The ironic thing about the clownish bully who climaxed the grotesque tragedy in Dallas was that he apparently acted out of a twisted code of ethics picked up in the alleys of three cities. An uneducated guy whose way of life had developed from the petty scrounge to the super-scrounge, he identified with the purposeful, powerful brilliance of U.S. Presidents, especially Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy.

The biggest word in his vocabulary was "class," said Dallas columnist Tony Zoppi of Ruby. "He took this thing [the assassination] very personally. President Kennedy was everything Ruby wasn't and would have liked to be: polished, classy, articulate, educated, well-mannered. Ruby wasn't any of these." No, Jack Ruby was a zircon in the rough. He had the bully's idea of civility—if someone gave the Bronx cheer to his strippers at the Carousel Club, Ruby put down his pet dachshund and personally bounced the unmannerly fel-

low. Like most hustlers who have to fawn and scrape before authority, Ruby was an authoritarian moral force in his own rancid universe. "I got principles," he liked to say. He once helped a Dallas cop fight off three hoodlums. But, reportedly, he once bit off a man's nose, and he wears a metal plate in his head as a souvenir of an attempted gate-crashing at a prizefight.

Ruby never got out of high school, slid off to the soiled fringes of legality—scalped tickets, peddled hot haberdashery, kept score at a Chicago gambling operation. Eventually he became a labor organizer—for the Waste Material Handlers Federal Labor Union (which was thrown out of the AFL-CIO in 1957 on charges of corruption). But "Sparky" Ruby's bicep-brained enthusiasm was too much for the Teamster-connected outfit, and he was moved out by Jimmy Hoffa's pal Paul Dorfman.

Eating Money: Ruby's second city was San Francisco, where during the Depression years he scrambled for a living among the crummy bars, second-rate strip joints, and B-girl hangouts of the North End Tenderloin district. "But in those days," says a friend of that period, "us kids wasn't like the gangs today. We were more interested in trying to scrape up a little eating money. We weren't looking for fights or trouble. Everything we did was honest. And that's the way Jack was..."

Honest Jack Ruby popped out of San Francisco when a punchboard racket he was operating won him some death

threats. He went back to Chicago where he became a vague hanger-on in the incredible, violent world of such characters as Tony (Big Tuna) Accardo, Martin (The Ox) Ochs, Paul (Needlenose) Labriola, and "Zookie the Bookie" Zuckerman. Ruby, in one of the many twists of the rudderless torpedo, approached the Kefauver committee in 1949, offering to give information about the "crime syndicate." But Chicago attorney Luis Kutner remembers Ruby as someone trying to impress "the boys" with his connections. "He was a nervous, ambitious, frustrated guy who never made the big time," says Kutner.

Drinking It Up: The big time had to wait until Ruby went to Big D. There he liked to vary his Capone outfit with the Western mummery of big white Stetson, fancy cowboy jacket, and flashy leather boots. He became known as the "Chicago cowboy." He briefly returned to Chicago where he tried unsuccessfully to promote "Sugar Daddy," a 12-year-old song-and-dance man. He later returned to Dallas and opened the Sovereign Club, a private snuggery where drinkers brought their own whisky. The Sovereign was right across the street from the Adolphus Hotel, Dallas's "Waldorf-Astoria," and soon big Texas businessmen and even celebrities were drinking it up at Ruby's place.

But Jack Ruby was never really satisfied in his yearning for social acceptance. "Jada" Conforto, the 27-year-old red-haired stripper who works at Ruby's Carousel Club, says: "He used to wonder if people liked him. He looked like a little cupid with a little grin on his face and he always asked everybody's opinion on everything. He couldn't make up his mind." And she adds, "I'm surprised he didn't ask anybody if he



With 'Sugar Daddy': Not a midget UPI

should shoot Oswald. I really mean it. He must have asked somebody."

Miss Conforto's irony is not far from the truth. "I feel so guilty," says Ruby's sister, Mrs. Eva Grant. "My brother and I saw Oswald on TV, and we both agreed he looked like a creep. I said, 'Don't worry. Someone will shoot him.'"

Ruby had been arrested several times on minor offenses, yet he hung around the Dallas Police Station like a punchy fighter hanging around a gym. "You know," said cops with hint of a second meaning, "he had to stay friendly with police. He had to keep his license."

At the police station on Saturday, he passed out calling cards, showing a leggy nude in black silk stockings, to everyone including District Attorney Henry Wade. He played a bit part during the district attorney's press conference, supplying an answer about Dallas geography. Jack Ruby was bringing to a climax the career of the most fateful kibitzer of all time.

The American: His own sister cannot help talking about him in a mixture of praise and inadvertent satire. "Jack was very religious," she says. "When our father died he went to the temple every morning and said the Kaddish every morning for a year." But then she can add: "Once when we lived in San Francisco we had about \$200 in the bank. Jack took \$80 out and bet against Barney Ross. Ross knocked out his opponent and Jack fainted. They carried him out the same time they carried Ross's opponent out." Ruby's final act was the perfect synthesis of his molasses and brass-knuckles character. His lawyer, Tom Howard, a garish, diamond-stickpin type who was once disbarred for failure to file an income-tax return, quotes Ruby: "I saw that Oswald was smiling and so cocky. He acted so proud of what he had done. I kept thinking about how Jackie had suffered and how Caroline and John wouldn't have a daddy . . . It was so sad." Howard says: "Millions of Americans would have done the same thing."

So Jack Ruby, who grew up in the same neighborhood that produced "Baby Face" Nelson and other heroes of homicide, performed the most sensational vigilante act in history. It was, in a way, another of his many impulsive reflexes of violence, from belting a snotty stripper to flaring up when friends said that "Sugar Daddy" was really a midget. Jack Ruby's midget moral sense even now makes him think of himself as a hero outside the law—but he has always been outside the law. "The FBI and the officers are treating me well," he told Mrs. Grant. "I've got friends." And his sister, with incredible, pathetic, and exasperating unconscious irony, says: "We didn't discuss the shooting. It's sort of an old-fashioned family code of ethics."