

Jack Ruby, Oswald and

— Part 5 of a series —

Following is the fifth article in a seven-part serialization of Kantor's book.

By SETH KANTOR

After the Jack Ruby trial ended, Leon Hubert and Burt Griffin, the Warren Commission's two Ruby experts, tried to convince commission members in memorandums on March 19 and April 1, 1964, that there was "substantial evidence" showing Jack Ruby had maintained unexplained Cuban associations. But their efforts were blocked by the CIA and discouraged by others on the commission staff.

Therefore, the Warren Commission never explored the possible links of Ruby's Cuban activities in 1959 with his FBI contacts that year and with Ruby's totally unexplained use of a safety deposit box at the time of his Cuban and FBI interests.

RUBY RENTED BOX 448 at his bank in Dallas, the Merchants State, where he maintained a small business checking account and no savings account. He'd had no known safety deposit box in 11 previous years as a Dallas resident—and he rented the box the day before the first of his regular meetings as an undercover FBI contact with FBI agent Charles W. Flynn.

Then he used the box 12 times in 1959, in exactly the same seven-month stretch in which was meeting nine times with Flynn.

That seven-month period included much of Ruby's known Cuban-related trips and meetings in 1959.

But even as they were being thwarted within the commission from digging into Ruby's Cuban connections, Hubert and Griffin saw no special relationship between Ruby's meetings with the FBI and his activities concerning Cuba.

"I assumed in 1964," says Griffin now, "that the FBI contacts with Ruby in 1959 were rather routine requests for information about vice and organized crime . . . I don't remember if it occurred to me in 1964 that such FBI contacts in 1959 might have been in connection with Cuban matters; but I doubt that I ever had that in mind, based on other information we had from the CIA and FBI in April 1964. I

News World

the Cuban

NEW YORK, NEW YORK
MONDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1978

Connection

now believe the FBI should be asked to disclose all information about the purposes of those 1959 contacts with Ruby and the information he was asked to provide, if they have not already done so."

THE FBI SO FAR has said the contacts were useless, that Ruby provided no worthwhile information. But what Griffin is suggesting here is something different, when he asks that the FBI make public now what kinds of information the bureau was seeking from Ruby in 1959.

"If Hoover concealed information that the 1959 FBI contacts were about Cuban matter," Griffin says, "such a concealment would be important and serious."

By December 1977, the FBI released some, but not all, information out of agent Flynn's file on Ruby. It shows that Ruby was listed as a PCI (potential criminal informant) and was contacted on matters concerning the interstate transportation of gambling devices, lottery tickets and obscene matter—along with questions relating to the FBI's general investigative intelligence file, which ranged broadly enough to include such categories as organized crime and Cuba.

Ruby's movements at key points in 1959 indicate a proximity of his Cuban,

FBI and bank-box affairs, as this chronology shows:

Jan. 1—Fidel Castro takes control of Cuba.

Jan. 8—Ruby is believed to have made his first contact on this date with Robert Ray y "Dick" McKeown, a Bashore, Texas, gun-runner who had been supplying Castro with arms.

Feb. 1—Ruby tells McKeown he represents a source in Las Vegas who wants to get three Castro prisoners out of jail in Cuba (at a time when Castro had several U.S. underworld figures jailed there). Ruby meets McKeown in Kemah, Texas, and offers \$25,000 for a personal introduction to Castro.

March 11—Ruby meets with Dallas FBI agent Flynn and agrees to become an FBI contact.

March 15—Throughout this time period, Ruby telephones and meets with Tom Davis, a gun-runner with CIA ties, in Beaumont.

April 2—The Dallas police department's Criminal Intelligence Division lists Ruby and syndicate gambling-house operator Lewis J. McWillie among those connected with professional gambling activities in the community.

April 27—Castro travels to Houston after completing a controversial trip of several days to Washington, New York and Boston. Ruby rents safety deposit box 448 at Merchants State Bank.

April 28—Castro meets with McKeown and offers him a post in the Castro government, but McKeown is serving a five-year probated federal sentence as a gun-runner and would become a U.S. fugitive if he takes off in Castro's private plane, as he is invited to do. McKeown turns down the offer at the airport. Ruby meets with Flynn for the first time in his role as undercover contact.

May 7—Ruby uses his safety deposit box.

May 15 (approx.)—Elaine Mynier (cq) of Dallas, who is dating McWillie, carries a coded message to Cuba from Ruby. She relates the message to McWillie.

May 17—Ruby uses his safety deposit box.

May 22—Ruby uses the safety deposit box.

June 2—Again, Ruby uses the box.

June 5—Ruby meets with FBI agent Flynn.

June 18—Ruby meets again with Flynn.

June 22—Ruby uses his safety deposit box.

July 1—Ruby uses the safety deposit box.

July 3—Norman "Roughhouse" Rothman, a U.S. Mafia figure and Cuban racketeer who is an associate of Florida numbers-racket boss Santo Trafficante Jr., is arrested in connection with an \$8.5 million Canadian bank heist of convertible bonds. Federal authorities link the Canadian job with a large theft of arms from an Ohio National Guard armory and with Rothman's \$6,000 rental agreement on an airplane, as part of a massive Cuban gun-running project.

July 7—Ruby meets with agent Flynn.

July 8—The Castro cabinet decides that Trafficante, key figure in the Lansky gambling empire in Havana, is to be expelled from Cuba along with two others. Trafficante, meanwhile, is held in a Havana-area jail.

July 9—Ruby uses his safety deposit box.

July 20—Ruby uses the safety deposit box again.

July 21—Ruby meets with agent Flynn.

Aug. 1 (approx.)—A dinner Ruby shares in an airport restaurant with one of the Fox brothers (operators of the mob-connected Tropicana casino in Havana) and two criminally associated Dallas attorneys, David C. McCord and Alfred E. McClane, appears to have occurred in July or August.

Aug. 6—Ruby meets with agent Flynn.

Aug. 31—Ruby meets again with Flynn in the week of his departure for Cuba.

Sept. 4—Ruby uses his safety deposit box and then departs for Cuba.

Sept. 5—According to estimates of Ruby and others, he spends next several days, including a long Labor Day weekend, in Cuba with McWillie. Ruby also visits gangster "Louis Santos" (an assumed name used by Trafficante) in jail more than once, according to a British witness.

Sept. 12—Ruby is in the Miami area, where gangster Rothman has an interest in the Biltmore Terrace Hotel. According to airline records, Ruby flies back to Havana for one day.

Sept. 13—Ruby then flies from Havana to New Orleans.

Sept. 21—Ruby uses his safety deposit box again.

Oct. 2—Ruby meets for the last time with Flynn as a contact.

Oct. 28—Ruby opens his safety deposit box for the last time in 1959

(he uses it only four times more in the next 17 months and, when authorities crack it open late in 1963, it is empty.)

BEFORE HE QUIT the House Assassinations Committee at the end of March 1977, chief counsel Richard A. Sprague saw to it that Trafficante was found and subpoenaed to testify before the House panel.

(Trafficante refused to be questioned in a closed session. When he showed up before cameras and reporters on March 16, 1977, he made a point of refusing to answer any questions posed by Sprague and committee members, to demonstrate that he would not have to be otherwise silenced.)

Of special significance is Trafficante's knowledge of what went on at the Churchill Farms estate of Carlos Marcello, the tough little Mafia boss of New Orleans, when Marcello called in other organized-crime.

Trafficante was invited to attend the sinister, turbulent meeting in which Marcello demanded Kennedy blood. As a result, Trafficante knew intimately what transpired at the Churchill Farms meeting.

That same month, September 1962, Trafficante confided to Jose Aleman, a prominent member of the Cuban exile community in Miami, that the Kennedys could not be trusted.

Trafficante complained that Robert Kennedy, the attorney general and Marcello's bitter enemy, was harassing Jimmy Hoffa, portrayed by Trafficante as a friend of the working class. As a result, "Louis Santos" said menacingly, President Kennedy would get what was coming to him.

Aleman disagreed. He recalls arguing that Kennedy would be re-elected, according to George Crile III, Washington editor of Harper's, who talked with Aleman.

"No, Jose," said Trafficante. "He is going to be hit."

In 1961, Ruby was involved in a plan to sell British Enfield rifles obtained in Mexico to anti-Castro Cubans, according to Warren Commission testimony from a self-described ex-prostitute, Nancy Perrin Rich, who had worked for Ruby that year.

WHEN HE WAS IN JAIL in Dallas in 1964, Ruby became hysterical one evening, sobbing to his guard that he had been running guns to Cuba and was remorseful for having done it, but regained his composure later, claiming he only had been referring to four handguns he'd mailed in 1959 to



gambler McWillie in Havana.

As Ruby's interests in gun-smuggling grew, he undertook what appears to have been a series of secretive, illegal and unexplained trips to Cuba.

Even J. Lee Rankin, the Warren Commission staff director, suspected that Ruby had slipped into Cuba as recently as the summer of 1963, less than six months before the murder of President Kennedy.

Rankin met with Richard M. Helms, the CIA's deputy director for plans, on March 12, 1964, as the Ruby trial was drawing to a close. Rankin told the intelligence official the commission had information that Ruby had managed to reach Havana in 1963—presumably using a Czechoslovakian passport with an alias and by way of Mexico City.

Helms told Rankin the CIA "would be limited in its possibility assisting" the commission in establishing details about any such movements by Ruby, according to a still-censored portion of

a CIA memorandum on the Helms-Rankin meeting.

THE CIA made no apparent effort to furnish the Warren Commission with any details of Ruby's Cuban transactions and the commission never hinted publicly that it suspected Ruby may have made an illegal trip to Cuba in 1963.

The Commission never examined any of the possible times when Ruby could have slipped out of the country in 1963.

One such time was a 72-hour period

in June, when Ruby's whereabouts continue to be a mystery. According to Ruby, he was in New Orleans seeking a striptease act between June 5 and the morning of June 9. He said he was especially interested in seeing one stripper, Jada, perform, after making a 28-minute telephone call on June 5 from Dallas to Jada's agent in New Orleans.

Harold Tannenbaum, who was Jada's agent, says he had no contact with Ruby again until the night of June 8 and the Warren Commission found no identifying records to show Ruby was in a hotel or anywhere else between the nights of June 5 and 8.

That was totally out of character for Ruby. Normally when Ruby left Dallas, he made himself very visible. He talked to hotel clerks, bellboys and taxi drivers. He told them who he was and why he was there. He handed out Carousel Club cards and made long-distance telephone calls.

BUT THIS TIME, on the New Orleans trip, there was not a handed-out card, not a sound, not a trace—until Saturday night, June 8, when a number of people suddenly saw and heard him. There would be every good reason to suspect he hadn't been in New Orleans any earlier that week.

(Those 72 unaccounted hours in Ruby's life were not the only time he secretly could have flown to and from Cuba in 1963. There had been another 72-hour span in April as well, when there was no record of Ruby being anywhere, including Dallas. It was the second week of April—the week Bob Price of Houston claims he met Ruby while Ruby appeared to be on his way to a private-plane ride to Cuba.

Price says he was in Houston's Escapade Club early one afternoon when Ruby and three other men walked in. Ruby was well known to the Escapade's day manager and was introduced to Price, who says he sat with the manager and talked with the four men for nearly four hours. One of the four was a pilot who talked knowledgeably about having flown pipeline inspections over west Texas.

The pilot and other members of the Ruby party said they were on their way to a small private airfield near Alvin, Texas, south of Houston, according to Price, who says Ruby was bragging he would bring back boxes of cigars from their trip.

Whether Ruby really flew to Cuba from Mexico under an assumed name, as Rankin had been informed, or flew there at night in a private plane from the Pearland or Clover airfields near Alvin (not far from the Gulf of Mexico), the patterns of Ruby's unexplained absences in April and June were the same. Each time, there was no record of his movements for 72 hours.

Perhaps of more significance was a press release issued on Jan. 29, 1964, by an anti-Castro group in Miami known as the Cuban Student Directorate, which said.

"Jack Ruby . . . stayed in Cuba during (the end of) 1962 and the begin-

nings of 1963. Ruby flew to Havana from Mexico City.

"During his stay in Havana, Ruby was a habitual visitor at a Cuban souvenir store located across the street from the Seville Hotel, in (sic) Prado Avenue. This store belonged to a man named Saloman (cq) Pratkins."

The organization identified none of its sources and The Miami News carried the story without sources prominently that day.

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immediately began to investigate and discovered that the group's information had come from Evido Pereira, a Cuban refugee who lived in Miami. Pereira told the agents he in turn had received the information from his sister-in-law in Havana, in a letter that had been postmarked Dec. 28, 1963, and that he had made the letter available to the FBI.

Pereira also told the agents the person Ruby had visited in Havana was named Praskin, not Pratkins. Praskin, he said, owned a house on Prado Street, between Animas and Trocadero.

The CIA said it could find no trace of anyone in Havana under either name, whom Ruby may have visited in late December 1962 and early January 1963. But the FBI developed information that Praskin was "a Czech or Pole (and) supposedly a close friend of Fidel-Castro."

At about the same time that Pereira's sister-in-law sent him the information about Ruby, an underground anti-Castro group in Havana was distributing a mimeographed circular that gave less specific information about Ruby's reported visit than the Pereira letter had, but did say that Ruby had lodged in the Sevilla hotel.

The underground circular, named Accion, referred to Jack Ruby as "El Matador," which literally means the man "appointed" to kill the bull in a bull ring.

NEXT: Police connections.