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Who was Jack Ruby?

Exclusive seven-part book serialization

On Nov. 24, 1963, Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby, in full view of millions of people around the world who were watching on television and despite heavy security, shot and killed Lee Harvey Oswald, accused assassin of President John F. Kennedy.

Immediately, the questions began—Did Ruby know Oswald? Were they in on the assassination together? Did Ruby kill Oswald to shut him up? If not for that reason, then why? How did Ruby manage to get through Dallas police security? Who WAS Jack Ruby? Most critics of the Warren Commission feel that it failed to answer any of these questions satisfactorily.

Seth Kantor, who recently joined the Washington bureau of the Atlanta Constitution and a longtime North American Newspaper Alliance correspondent, knew Ruby in Dallas, spoke with him at Parkland Memorial Hospital the day Kennedy was shot and was subsequently questioned by the Warren Commission. In 1974, using the Freedom of Information Act, Kantor began to look for the answers to the Jack Ruby puzzle.

The result—“WHO WAS JACK RUBY?” published this month by Everest House. It is a book which Publisher's Weekly says “tears to shreds” the commission's portrait of Ruby. Following is the first article in a seven-part serialization of Kantor's book.

By Seth Kantor

June 7, 1964, was another one of those days for the top people on the Warren Commission. They were blowing it again.

This time, it was the commission's interview with Jack Ruby and it was being done behind the backs of Leon D. Hubert Jr. and Burt W. Griffin, the two attorneys who had been running the commission's investigation of Ruby for six months, since it had begun.

Relations were uncomfortable between the team of Hubert and Griffin and the Warren Commission's top management, which was U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, the chairman, and J. Lee Rankin, the general council and staff director. Warren and Rankin were impatient because the two staff attorneys kept trying to broaden the probe into Ruby's background, especially the Cuban angles, rather than simply shutting down their investigation.

Instead, Hubert and Griffin had written a snappish, 11-page memorandum to Rankin on May 14, three weeks before the Ruby interview. The memo in effect said the commission had done a lousy job so far in carrying out an adequate investigation into three major areas Hubert and Griffin had been trying to explore: Why had Ruby killed Lee Harvey Oswald? Was Ruby associated with Oswald in any way? Did Ruby have confederates in the murder of Oswald?

RANKIN SIZZLED at the tone of the May 14 memorandum and, at a private luncheon between the two on June 1, Hubert was allowed to resign from an active role as designated chief of the Ruby investigation.

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Hubert's associate, Burt Griffin, remained full-time on the commission staff, but was not asked to go to Dallas for the Ruby interview, because Griffin clearly was in Rankin's doghouse.

Griffin had gone down to Dallas three months earlier and, in the course of taking sworn testimony from several Dallas policemen, went off the record with one of them, telling Sgt. Patrick T. Dean that he didn't believe him. Griffin didn't speak harshly to Dean, but urged him to "tell the truth" for the good of the "national interest."

A former U.S. attorney in Cleveland, Griffin was known to his colleagues as a vigorous interrogator of witnesses. And on March 24, 1964, Griffin accused the police sergeant of having made up information about what Ruby is supposed to have admitted shortly after shooting Oswald.

According to Dean, Ruby admitted planning on his own to kill Oswald as early as 35 hours before he actually pulled the trigger, which strengthened the prosecution's case of premeditated murder against Ruby. Ruby denied he ever made such a statement and insisted he shot Oswald on impulse.

Secondly, Sgt. Dean said Ruby admitted entering the police station basement by way of the Main Street ramp. The admission was made in front of Secret Service agent Forrest V. Sorrels, Dean said. Sorrels denied Ruby ever made such a statement in front of him.

Dean had been a key prosecution witness at Ruby's murder trial. His testimony played a major role in the sentencing of Ruby to die in the electric chair.

IN A SIX PAGE memorandum to Rankin, written March 30, Griffin furnished a number of reasons to investigate Dean further. Griffin also said he had reason to suspect "that Ruby came by another entrance to a point where Dean could have stopped him and that Dean, having been directly responsible for all basement security, is trying to conceal his dereliction of duty."

Griffin advised Rankin in writing that there was reason to believe Dean had told Ruby to say he had entered the basement by way of the ramp.

Dean was furious. He went to Dallas District Attorney Henry Wade to complain about Griffin's charges. There was an exchange of excited phone calls between Dallas and Warren Commission headquarters in Washington.

"The situation was critical and tense," remembers Howard P. Willens, Rankin's deputy. "My own judgment was that Burt Griffin was a very competent and aggressive investigator, and was right in pursuing it aggressively."

Willens supported Griffin and believed that "no real punishment or sanction was appropriate."

But Rankin caved in under pressure from

Texas officials to get Griffin off Dan's back. Rankin ordered the investigator to return to Washington. He was still stuck there on June 7, the day others went to Dallas to meet with Ruby.

Some commission staff members were very much upset that Hubert and Griffin had been ignored. One of them, David W. Belin, talked privately of resigning. Hubert and Belin's wife talked with Belin and helped convince him not to walk out on the investigation. Hubert rationalized that even if he had gone to Dallas to interview Ruby, the questions would have been controlled by Warren and Rankin anyway.

For instance, Gerald R. Ford, the lone Republican member appointed to the commission, was the only other member besides the chief justice who traveled to Dallas that Sunday. Ford was particularly interested in questioning Ruby about his Cuba connections.

Ford waited patiently for more than two hours for a chance to start his line of questioning. He had just begun asking the route of Ruby's 1959 trip to Cuba when Rankin interrupted, asking Ruby abruptly if he remembered being taken upstairs to a cell in the Dallas police station after he had shot Oswald.

"That is so small to remember, I guess it's automatic, you know," Ruby shrugged.

Rankin was groping. He tried something else before Ford could pick up the Cuba thread of the questions again.

"Did you have this gun a long while that you did the shooting with?" Rankin asked. Ruby answered, "Yes." Moments later, Warren appeared ready to close the interview.

"You can get more out of me," Ruby invited. "Let's not break up too soon."

FORD TOOK OVER the questioning again, on the details of Ruby's 1959 visit to Lewis J. McWillie in Havana. McWillie had run crime syndicate gambling operations in Texas and was identified in Dallas police criminal intelligence section records as a murderer. This time, Warren firmly broke off Ford's questions and changed the subject.

"Ford never did finish his interrogation on Cuba," recalls one of those present, Joe H. Tonahill, a Ruby attorney. "Warren blocked Ford out on it. That was very impressive, I thought. Ford gave him a hard look, too. I was sitting right there and saw it happen."

In the first of three hours of the commission interview, Ruby went into a rambling, often-irrelevant discourse on what he had done for two days before killing Oswald, and then lapsed into one of his real hangups: his Jewishness. He began to rant that Jews would be killed in massive numbers in retribution for his having killed Oswald. At times, Ruby could be a hot-tempered, two-bit thug who brawled and bellowed in behalf of his Jewishness. On a scale of from 1 to 10, Ruby was a 1. In the hot swirl of emotion after he shot Oswald, the former Jacob Rubenstein was reported to have blurted: "I did it to prove Jews have guts."

Jack Ruby and why did he shoot



On that fateful November day in Dallas, President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy posed in their open car with Gov. and Mrs. John Connally. Moments later, Lee Harvey Oswald's bullets ripped through the president. Jack Ruby was reported in a newspaper office when the assassination occurred. Oswald was himself to feel the assassin's bullets when Ruby shot him point blank.

t Oswald?



Jack Ruby

DESPITE THE RAMBLING there was a theme that began to emerge after the first hour of the Ruby monologue to the Warren Commission on his actions before shooting Oswald. The theme was repeated several times, weaving through a lot of other thoughts. It was that Ruby was a desperate man, begging to be taken out of Texas to Washington, where he could talk to Warren without fearing for his life. Like Tonahill, Ruby was aware the room could be bugged. Even if the room were cleared of the sheriff and others, Ruby felt he could not confide in Warren there.

Ruby asked eight times to be taken to Washington, growing almost frantic about it towards the end. After the fourth time, Warren said it could not be done.

But it certainly could have been done in reasonably short order by the Warren Commission, with its blanket subpoena powers to bring any witness to Washington.

Instead, Warren obviously must have concluded that the witness either was an opportunist making a grandstand move, or else was some kind of nut.

As to Ruby as an opportunist, there is no doubt about it. He was. Ruby was fascinated in particular by Joe Valachi, a convict transported from an Atlanta Federal Penitentiary cell to Washington to tell what he knew. Valachi detailed La Cosa Nostra operations before a congressional panel in the autumn of 1963—the period leading directly into the day Ruby shot Oswald.

Valachi made big headlines that autumn as a heavily protected informer in Washington. There is no doubt Ruby was acutely aware that if he had been removed from Texas to Washington, he would have entered a federal jurisdiction where he might have bargained his way as a songbird into a safer custody.

But the fact that Ruby was an opportunist wouldn't have ruled him out as someone who had valid information to give. Actually, in his role as opportunist, Ruby had been a two-way informer between the police and the hoods on a number of levels—a double agent among the chasers and the chasees.

Ruby had been an FBI contact in 1959, before and after he took the enigmatic trip to Cuba that Gerald Ford questioned Ruby about in more detail than Warren cared to hear. Ruby's hidden relationship with the FBI was not made public by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover until several years after the Warren Report was published. The commission cooperated with the FBI to keep that relationship from being made public in 1964 when the Warren Report came out.

In view of the later disclosure that Ruby had been an FBI contact, what would Burt Griffin, now an Ohio judge, have done differently about the commission's whole approach to Ruby if the 1964 investigation could have replayed?

"I would look for serious implications, rather than psychotic implications, behind the fact that Ruby kept wanting to come and talk with Earl Warren alone," Griffin says. "I would have treated this whole thing as possibly the efforts of a serious man, rather than a crazy man."

It seems apparent that by turning their backs on Ruby, Warren and Rarlin could have made one of the critical mistakes of the investigation.

Tonahill was asked if Ruby could have been a blackmailed hostage of Dallas officers who might have had something on him—which could have led to his wanting to get away from them.

"They might have been doing that. Blackmailing him. We don't know all the activities Ruby was engaged in," Tonahill replied, "and we don't know what type of reaction he could have had to certain accusations over trivial matters."

Tonahill said, "The people Ruby was dealing with and running with made him a sitting duck

for any kind of verbal accusation that the law-enforcement people wanted to make against him, and it may be that he was scared, and that he could speak more freely in Washington than he could" in Dallas.

Ruby seemed to be scared. In the excited way that he talked, using the strange word patterns of his upbringing in a West Side Chicago immigrant neighborhood, he pleaded, "I may not live tomorrow to give any further testimony... and the only thing I want to get

The words came out in a jumble, but Ruby couldn't have put it more clearly. He said he would tell "why my act was committed, but it can't be said here." Who was he afraid of and why?

out of the public, and I can't say it here, is with authenticity, with sincerity of the truth of everything, and why my act was committed but it can't be said here."

THE WORDS CAME out in a jumble, but Ruby couldn't have put it more clearly. He said he would tell "why my act was committed, but it can't be said here." Who was he afraid of and why?

Perhaps the answers to those two questions were just as clearly there in the tumult of everything else Ruby had to say that afternoon to the Warren Commission.

Once he was sworn in by the chief justice of the United States—a privilege usually reserved for presidents being inaugurated—Ruby launched into a 50-minute monologue, relating to his version of where he had gone and what he had done in the hours after President Kennedy's murder on Friday, Nov. 22, 1963.

Ruby then described an encounter he'd had in the early morning shadows of Saturday, Nov. 23, with Harry N. Olsen, a Dallas police officer who was with one of Ruby's strippers. Olsen told Ruby that Oswald should be "cut inch by inch into ribbons" and praised Ruby as "the greatest guy in the world" according to Ruby.

When Olsen was questioned by the FBI, he acknowledged the encounter but denied encouraging Ruby to murder Oswald and told the FBI he "never liked Ruby." A month after the shooting of Oswald, Olsen abruptly left the police force under unclear circumstances and left Dallas.

For months, Ruby remained close-mouthed about his hour long clandestine conversation with the Dallas policeman—a conversation that took place soon after Oswald's arraignment for the murder of another Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit.

Ruby never brought up the Olsen meeting when he underwent a series of interrogations by local authorities, the Secret Service, FBI agents and psychiatrists who reviewed his movements with him before his murder trial—when premeditated murder on his part was the central issue. The meeting between Ruby and Olsen involved the strong suggestion of premeditation.

RUBY'S MURDER TRIAL had been over for nearly three months at the time he testified before the Warren Commission in the Dallas county jail. He had been sentenced to death, but that verdict was pending before the state appellate court and Ruby's chances of getting a reduced term with eventual parole through a new trial seemed favorable.

"I don't want to evade any crime I'm guilty

of," Ruby told Warren. Why then would he want to be removed from Texas in order to talk, if it weren't that Ruby feared for his life behind Texas bars?

Ruby and his lawyer already feared that a guard placed outside his cell on a regular basis—Sheriff's Deputy Jess W. Stevenson—had been transmitting Ruby's confidences to Texas lawmen. Stevenson had gained Ruby's trust and eventually Ruby had cause to believe that others were able to eavesdrop on him through a miniature listening device in Stevenson's clothing.

Pointedly, Ruby waited until he reached a crucial place deep in his testimony to ask for the first time that the commission remove him from Texas and place him in protective custody in Washington. It happened so abruptly that the chief justice was taken by surprise.

"I beg your pardon?" said Warren, incredulously.

"It is very important," said Ruby.

THE EXCHANGE took place moments before Ruby disclosed that he had discussed with Officer Olsen the fate Oswald deserved. Here was a Dallas policeman who had a reputation on the force of being unstable, meeting in the dark of night with Ruby, who had a gun with him—with no license to carry it—and a set of brass knuckles in his car. Ruby's concept of Dallas was that "this is a homicidal town." And Ruby was described by one of his own defense psychiatrists as "basically an extremely unstable man. This is an aggressive psychopath with definite antisocial feelings."

Immediately after disclosing limited details of the Olsen encounter, Ruby asked again for asylum in Washington. He said that "unless you get me to Washington, you can't get a fair shake out of me." He was telling them he was holding back information, perhaps in the Olsen encounter itself.

Ruby was, as his mother had been, an incessant talker, and as his drunken, wife-beating father had been, a loser. He was brash and mercurial, and never would have been trusted with knowledge of any plot to silence Oswald that would cause him to wind up in the arms of the police—unless, of course, some of the police themselves were involved. They could control his mouth.

AMONG THESE POLICE were men with gut-reaction motives. Some were convinced a trial wasn't required to prove Oswald was a cop-killer, some believed Oswald had fired into the Kennedy motorcade as an agent of a communist government.

The idea of doing away with Oswald didn't

originate with Ruby. Only minutes after the killing of Tippit, Oswald was arrested in the Texas Theatre. When he was brought outside, there already were angry people gathered on the sidewalk, shouting, "Kill the son of a bitch," and "Give him to us. We'll kill him." Such was the feeling in Ruby's homicidal town.

Some police were concerned about anonymous telephone threats of lynching when it came time to transfer Oswald from the city jail to the county jail a mile away. There was tenseness in the police department that a mob determined to get the prisoner might shoot any policemen in the way.

In order to exact from their own revenge on Oswald before he was sent out into the streets or placed in the custody of another jurisdiction, a few Dallas police contemplated getting the job done themselves.

Of course, no Dallas policeman could murder Oswald overtly and the most logical person in town to be brought in to perform the hit was Ruby, a violent man who carried concealed weapons routinely, a police informant who could gain access to the police station without question and who provided the police with favors.

For instance, Ruby was reliably reported to have cosigned Dallas bank loans for certain police. But, incredibly, the Warren Commission left the investigation of Ruby's reported cosignature in the hands of the Dallas police department to check out.

A check was made of four Dallas banks, but not of the one, Merchants State Bank, where Ruby did his business regularly and had two accounts.

Ruby also provided small cash loans to the police on his own and gave them discounts at the bar at his Carousel Club.

THE IDEA OF MURDERING Oswald, who appeared to Ruby to be "smirky, smug, vindictive," appealed to Ruby as something that had a patriotic overtone. Ruby fully expected to be treated as a hero and to be out on bond on the streets of Dallas a day after the shooting. He anticipated a large payoff in publicity dividends.

He was, after all, 52 years old, paunchy and balding, and still in search of the elusive big financial kill that would pull him back from the brink of economic ruin he faced almost daily.

The day he shot Oswald, Ruby possessed a small-claims-court summons for having passed a bad check to a downtown department store. The worthless check he'd written was for \$12.19.

"I have been used for a purpose," Ruby told Warren at their meeting in the Dallas county jail, drew near a close.

But nobody in the interrogation room even bothered to ask him who had used him and for what purpose.

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Tomorrow: The three days.