

Probers' Findings FEB 25 1977

How Mafia Silenced a Talker

By Nicholas Gage
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Shortly after John Rosselli testified before a Senate committee that he had participated in Central Intelligence Agency plots to kill Fidel Castro, a Washington friend asked him if he wasn't afraid for his life.

The 70-year-old Mafia figure appeared unconcerned: "Who'd want to kill an old man like me?" he asked.

Last August 7, when Miami police fished a 55-gallon oil drum from Dumbofounding bay and found Rosselli's body inside, there was no shortage of suspects, ranging from the CIA to Cuban agents or the Mafia itself.

However, two men who had personal knowledge of the murder have provided concrete information that Rosselli was killed by members of the underworld as a direct result of his testimony before the Senate committee.

The two men have provided details about Rosselli's death that are strongly supported by physical evidence uncovered in an extensive investigation by the New York Times. The investigation involved the examination of numerous documents, including Rosselli's testimony in the probe of President Kennedy's assassination, and scores of interviews.

Early speculation that the CIA or Cuban agents might have been involved in the Rosselli murder centered on the fact that another participant in the Castro assassination plots, Sam Giancana, a former Mafia boss of Chicago, had been murdered in his home a year earlier. Giancana was killed shortly before he was to be summoned before the Senate Committee on Intelligence.

Rosselli himself testified for the committee three times, the last a secret appearance three months before his death, when he was questioned about the assassination of President Kennedy.

The CIA may have been involved, according to one theory, because it feared further damaging revelations about its Mafia connections. The Cuban agents may have



JOHN ROSSELLI
He 'shot his mouth off'

been involved, according to another theory, because they sought to retaliate for the plots to kill Castro.

But the manner of Rosselli's murder differed sharply from that of any Cuban who has been killed in Miami, by either supporters or enemies of Fidel Castro.

"If Cubans had killed Rosselli, they would have shot him down in the street or blown him up in his car to make a point, not stuffed him in a barrel and thrown him in the bay," said Detective Julio Djeda, a member of the Miami homicide team investigating the Rosselli murder. Djeda is of Cuban origin.

Nevertheless, some of Rosselli's friends still believe Cuban agents were involved. They base their suspicions to some degree on the fact that Rosselli, before his death, told them he had information that Castro agents were involved in the assassination of Kennedy.

On April 23, 1976 — three months before his death — Rosselli was questioned about the Kennedy assassination by representatives of the Senate Intelligence Committee in a secret session in a suite of the Carroll Arms Hotel.

The transcript of Rosselli's testimony has been classified "top secret," but a copy of it was examined by the Times.

Rosselli testified that he had told some people he believed that

Fidel Castro was behind the Kennedy assassination. When asked if he had "any facts" to back up his supposition, he replied: "No facts."

The possibility that the CIA might have had Rosselli killed to keep him from disclosing damaging facts about the agency is discounted by those who know him best, including his closest friend, Joseph Breen, who was his partner in the gift shop at the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, which provided Rosselli's only source of income — \$80,000 a year — at the time of his death.

Breen said the CIA would not have killed Rosselli over his Senate committee testimony because he had checked with the CIA, "including Bill Harvey" — his CIA contact — prior to his appearance, and they told him to tell whatever he knew "because it was going to come out anyway."

Rosselli, however, was not so conscientious about clearing his Senate testimony with his Mafia associates, according to a high ranking Mafia figure, and it was this infraction that led to his death.

"When you're called before a committee like that, you have to go to your people and ask them what to do," the Mafia figure said. "Rosselli not only did not come to us, he went before the committee and shot his mouth off all over the place."

The Mafia man said Mafia leaders had been angry with Rosselli since 1971 when he appeared before a federal grand jury in Los Angeles investigating underworld involvement in the Frontier Hotel. Three Mafia leaders went to prison as a result of that investigation, and Rosselli was suspected — correctly, as it turned out — of having secretly provided information to the prosecution.

The Mafia figure said that shortly after Rosselli's first appearance before the Senate committee on June 24, 1975, his murder was approved by the commission of bosses that sets policy for the 26 Mafia families in the country.

Several members of the commission had wanted Rosselli killed since the Frontier Hotel case, and when the rest learned that he testified before the Senate committee, "They decided he would just go on talking every time he was

pressured, and he had to be hit," the Mafia figure said.

This explanation was confirmed in its essential points by Frank Bompensiero, the Mafia boss of San Diego, before he was shot to death inside his home on February 11. Bompensiero, he said, eventually found out he had been giving information to the FBI.

The other important Mafia figure who talked about the Rosselli murder is not an FBI informant but has provided information to the Times on a pledge that his identity would be protected.

He said that the reasons for the elimination of Rosselli were not related to the reasons for Sam Giancana's murder, although the same Mafia group, the Chicago family, was responsible. Giancana was killed because he tried to reassert his authority in Chicago after a ten-year absence, the Mafia figure said.

The task of killing Rosselli proved difficult because he was a cautious man. Nevertheless, his pursuers were persistent.

"They would watch his movements for a couple of weeks, leave him alone for a few months, then go back and watch him some more," the Mafia figure said.

"Rosselli was careful, but nobody can be that careful. When the decision is made to hit you — you're dead no matter how long it takes."

On July 28 Rosselli ate a late brunch at his sister's home in Plantation, Fla. Then, at 12:50 p.m., he left in her car, a silver 1975 Chevrolet Impala. He gave no hint of having an appointment and she assumed he would be back soon.

What happened then was described by the unnamed Mafia figure. Rosselli drove to a marina and went aboard a private boat where he was received by two men, one an old friend, the other a visitor from Chicago.

The boat put off, and a third man on shore drove the Rosselli car to the Miami International Airport, where it was later found.

While Rosselli was sipping a glass of vodka, the man from Chicago grabbed him from behind and held his hand tightly over Rosselli's nose and mouth until he was asphyxiated — not a difficult feat because Rosselli had emphysema.

A Cannon washcloth was taped tightly over Rosselli's mouth to

make sure he was dead. Then his legs were sawed off so that the body could be stuffed into an oil drum.

When the torso was finally lowered into the drum, the legs were stuffed in with it and heavy iron chains were laced through the holes in the drum, around the body and over the lid of the drum.

But the drum had not been weighted enough, and ten days later three fishermen spotted it on the edge of a sandbar beside a 28-foot-deep canal. They suspected a body might be inside and called police.