

When the decision is

# Mafia: the price of one

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NEW YORK — 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 Aug. 7, when Miami police fished a 55-gallon oil drum from Dumbo 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.

Early speculation that the CIA or Cuban agents might have been involved in the Rosselli murder centred 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 been involved, according to another theory, because

they sought to retaliate for the plots to kill Mr. 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 Mr. 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 Ojeda, a member of the Miami homicide team investigating the Rosselli murder, who is himself of Cuban origin.

The Cuban retaliation theory is also discounted by authorities because Robert Maheu, the most important figure in the plot against Mr. Castro and later a chief aide to the late Howard Hughes, has not been touched. "I think Castro is sophisticated enough to know the historical context in which those things (the plots on his life) were done," and forget about them, he said in an interview.

Three months before his death, on April 23, 1976, Rosselli was questioned about the Kennedy assassination by representatives of the Senate Intelligence Committee, including Senator Richard Schweiker, the Pennsylvania Republican, in a secret session in a suite of the Carroll Arms Hotel.

## Testimony top secret

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 Mr. Castro was behind the Kennedy assassination. When asked by Michael Epstein, a member of the committee's staff, if



Robert Maheu

he had any facts to back up his supposition, he replied: "No facts."

The possibility that the CIA may 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—\$60,000 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 what-

made to hit you—you're dead'

## man's testimony was death

ever he knew "because it was going to come out anyway." The agency, he said, "would have no reason to kill him."

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."

He 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.

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.

### 'Had to be hit'

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 outside his home on Feb. 10, apparently because

the Mafia found out he had been giving information to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The other important Mafia figure who talked about the Rosselli murder is not an FBI informant but has provided information 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 10-year absence. "Sam thought nothing had changed, but everything had changed," 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."

Rosselli's friend and relatives confirmed that he moved with extreme caution during the year after his Senate testimony, staying close to the rambling, white brick home of his sister and brother-in-law, Edith and Joseph Daigle, in Plantation, Fla. He moved in with the couple when he was released from prison in 1974.

The Daigles told authorities that Rosselli spent most days sitting by the pool reading, and most nights watching television. The few times he went out to dinner, he had his sister call the restaurants and make reservations in

her name, and he always dined out or played golf in the company of relatives and friends.

The only known instances when he deviated from this pattern, according to Miami authorities, were when he had dinner with Santos Trafficante, boss of Mafia rackets in Florida and the one major underworld figure with whom Rosselli maintained close contact in his last years.

The two dined together for the last time at the Landings Restaurant in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on July 16, 12 days before Rosselli was killed. Authorities believe it was a member of the Trafficante organization who was able to lure Rosselli to his death.

On July 28 Rosselli and his sister ate a late brunch and 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.

### Dead within an hour

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. "Within an hour after he got on the boat, he was dead," the Mafia figure said.