

Colombo Shot, Gunman Slain At Columbus Circle Rally Site

Killing of Assailant Not Done by Police, Inspector Says

By WILLIAM E. FARRELL

Before thousands of stunned spectators and amid heavy police security, Joseph A. Colombo Sr., the 48-year-old reputed chief of a Brooklyn Mafia family, was shot in the head and critically wounded at Columbus Circle yesterday less than an hour before a massive Italian-American civil rights rally began.

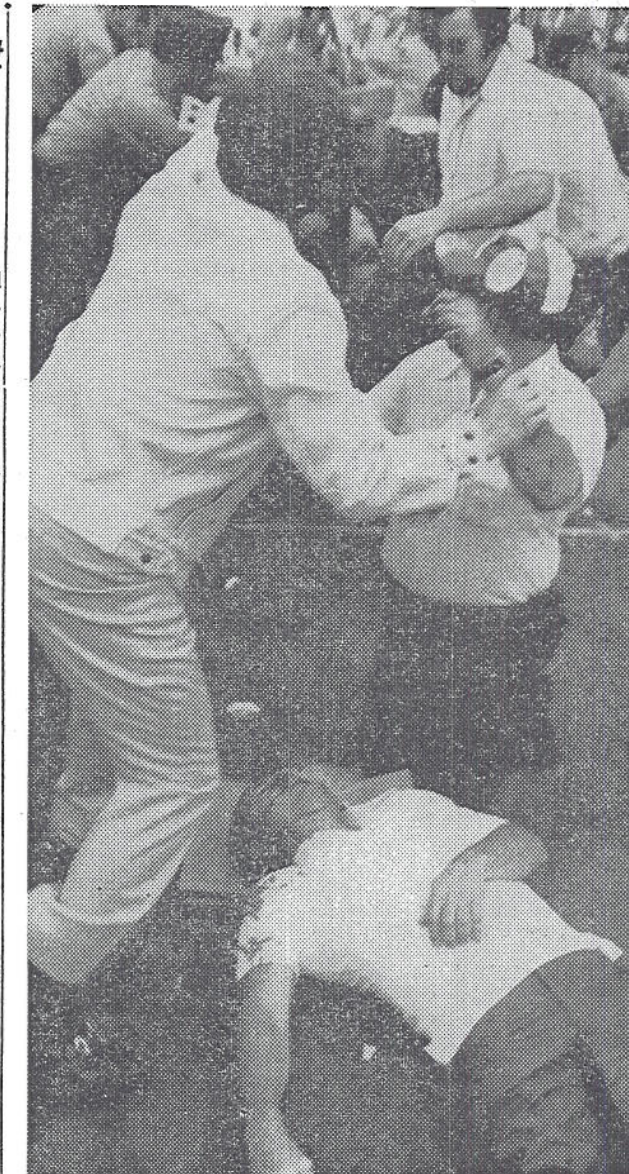
Colombo's assailant, a 25-year-old black man named Jerome A. Johnson, of 88 Throop Avenue, New Brunswick, N. J., was shot to death at the scene, but it was still not clear last night who had shot him—the police, associates of Colombo or unknown third parties.

After five hours of brain surgery at Roosevelt Hospital, Colombo was reported in a coma last night, and his chances of survival were estimated by surgeons to be "less than 50-50." Two bullets were removed, one from the mid-brain and the other from the back of the neck.

Calls Attack Planned

Chief of Detectives Albert A. Seedman said at a news conference last evening that the attack on Colombo was planned and that Johnson was not killed by a policeman, but he offered few details. Several reputed underworld leaders were picked up for questioning, including the Gallo brothers of Brooklyn, who have long been reported feuding with Colombo.

The major questions facing police, Chief Seedman said, are: Who killed Johnson? What



United Press International/Dirk Halstead

Two men who had gone to the aid of Joseph A. Colombo Sr. turn at the sound of gunfire as the attacker is shot.

was the purpose of the shooting of Colombo? Who else was involved?

The sudden spurt of gunfire took place shortly after 11:45 A.M. within 100 feet of the gaily festooned statue of Christopher Columbus, which was bedecked, as was the surrounding area, with plastic tatters of

red, white and green—the colors of the Italian flag.

Pandemonium engulfed the area, sending hysterical spectators, many of them women clutching small children, spilling uptown toward 61st Street. So sudden was the violent

Continued on Page 20, Column 1

outbreak in the area near the statue of Columbus and close to a large stage set up for the second annual Unity Day celebration of the Italian-American Civil Rights League, that the police — both uniformed and plainclothes men who were in the area—were initially as stunned as the spectators.

Within seconds, however, a phalanx of policeman, abetted by rally captains of the civil rights league, which Colombo founded last year, were cordoning off the scene of the violence.

There were shouts of "A colored guy did it!" and cries of "They got Colombo!" as a band struck up some music in an attempt to soothe the throng.

Within minutes, Colombo, who was reported to have received shots in the left jaw and lower parts of the right side of the head, was taken to Roosevelt Hospital, a stream of blood gushing from his neck and mouth.

Soon afterward, the body of Johnson was removed to Roosevelt Hospital as well, leaving an area within 25 feet of the stage stained with two pools of blood. The black horn-rimmed spectacles that Colombo wore were on the ground in the area fenced off with police barricades.

Dr. Evron Hanson, chief of neurosurgery at Roosevelt Hospital, said that Colombo was not breathing when he was placed in the ambulance, but that his breathing had been restored by an artificial respiration unit. There was concern that Colombo had suffered brain damage.

Valise Contains Gun

While the band played and shocked bystanders stared at the scene of the shootings, a man, later identified as Anthony Seccafico, who is reported to be a friend of Colombo's brother-in-law, Mike Seveno, picked up a blood-stained imitation-leather valise from the ground.

He was quickly seized by the police. Seccafico said, "I'm looking for Joe Colombo's bag." A pouch in the valise was opened by the police, and it contained a .38-caliber Colt pistol. The main part of the valise contained tricolor lapel pins of the civil rights league.

Seccafico was handcuffed and taken to Police Headquarters for questioning.

Several eyewitnesses gave accounts of the frenzied scene.

Carl Cecora, a 30-year-old rally captain, said: "I was standing by the fence and Joe was talking to everybody. This colored girl came up to him and said, 'Hello, Joe.' And he smiled and said, 'Hi ya.'"

"She was with a guy, a colored guy taking pictures, and they asked Joe to pose and everyone to spread out, and before you know it, the shooting started," Mr. Cecora said.

"Everybody jumped on him [the man with a gun]."

Girl Makes Escape

Mr. Cecora said the girl and a companion fled and "were over the barricade before anyone realized. I saw the colored guy lying on the ground and

he looked dead to me."

At this point, Mr. Cecora was interrupted by detectives and was taken in for questioning.

At his news conference, Chief Seedman said that several ranking police officers had been near Colombo just prior to the shooting and that Colombo had been checking on the vendors authorized to sell refreshments at the unity rally.

One of the policemen near Colombo was Deputy Chief Inspector Thomas Reid, who said he heard "two shots—maybe three," and along with other policemen pounced on "a black man with a gun."

"It was all over in a matter of seconds," Inspector Reid said. "I saw a hand sticking out with a gun and I jumped for the gun."

"A shot went off," Inspector Reid said, "we were holding

on to his hand—I don't know who shot the black man."

The confusion at the scene was reflected at the 18th Precinct station on West 54th Street, where detectives were interviewing uniformed policemen who had been among the hundreds assembling for the noon rally.

One captain, muttering in disgust at the comments the detectives were eliciting, was overheard to say: "Damn it. Didn't any one of these guys see or hear anything but a bunch of damn firecrackers going off?"

Just east of the shooting scene, looking down on, it was a camera platform used by a freelance television crew retained by the civil rights league to film the proceedings.

Witness Gives Account

A man who identified himself as James Delmonico, a 33-year-old freelance, said he witnessed the shooting.

"I watched Colombo walking," Mr. Delmonico said, "I saw a black man jump out behind the back of his [Colombo's] head. He fired three times with an automatic pistol. Colombo fell."

"There were two more shots, I think. They crowded around the guy with the gun. Colombo had blood all over his head. The black man looked like he got hit three or four times."

Near Colombo on the scene were members of his family, including his son Anthony, a vice president of the Italian-American Civil Rights League.

Minutes after the shooting, Colombo's sister, Loretta, was sobbing on the grandstand. She was soothed by Mrs. Anthony Colombo. Another woman said, "Your mother's going to come out and see you like this, you'll kill her ... don't let your mother see you like this."

Another woman said, "It's only in the arm. I heard he was only shot in the arm."

The group moved toward a yellow school bus and Mrs. Anthony Colombo became hysterical.

A rally captain, noticing she was in danger of fainting, slapped her face. Finally she revived a bit, and the two women were ushered into the

school bus and driven off.

Several young women who worked at the civil rights league office at 635 Madison Avenue reported that several threatening calls had been received after the shooting and that "a man called and said he was going to machine gun the whole Colombo family."

Office Ordered Closed

Later in the afternoon, Barry Slotnick, the league's attorney, ordered the office closed.

There were no signs during the afternoon of activity at the Colombo house at 1161 83d Street, between 11th and 12th Avenues, in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn.

The house is made of brick with a garage and porch facing the street. It has a wrought-iron fence and gate providing access to a side alley that leads to the living quarters.

At his news conference, Inspector Seedman said that Mr. Johnson had shown some kind of a pass to Unity Day officials and they had issued him their own working press badges embossed with the Italian tricolor. The police, he said, had not found the original card Mr. Johnson had used to show the Unity Day officials.

Inspector Seedman said that Joseph Gallo had been questioned for about an hour and a half and released.

"He's through for the day," Inspector Seedman said when asked if Gallo's release was permanent.

The police official said that the two Gallos and Carlo Gambino had been sought for questioning because of "stories of friction between the Gambino guys and the guys headed by Colombo." He provided no other details.

Inspector Seedman said that four guns had been impounded

and were being studied. A police spokesman said that one of the weapons came into the possession of a patrolman at the scene of the shooting when it was lobbed through the air, fell at the policeman's feet and was retrieved by him.

A high-ranking officer at the scene shook his head and said: "Nobody knows what happened. We know there were more guns here than what we have."

One of those who tried to bring normalcy to the scene was Richard Azeez, a rally captain, who said he had tried to shield Colombo's body after he fell.

"It was an hour before my legs stopped shaking," Mr. Azeez said as he manned a post to keep unauthorized persons from flooding the area of the stage.

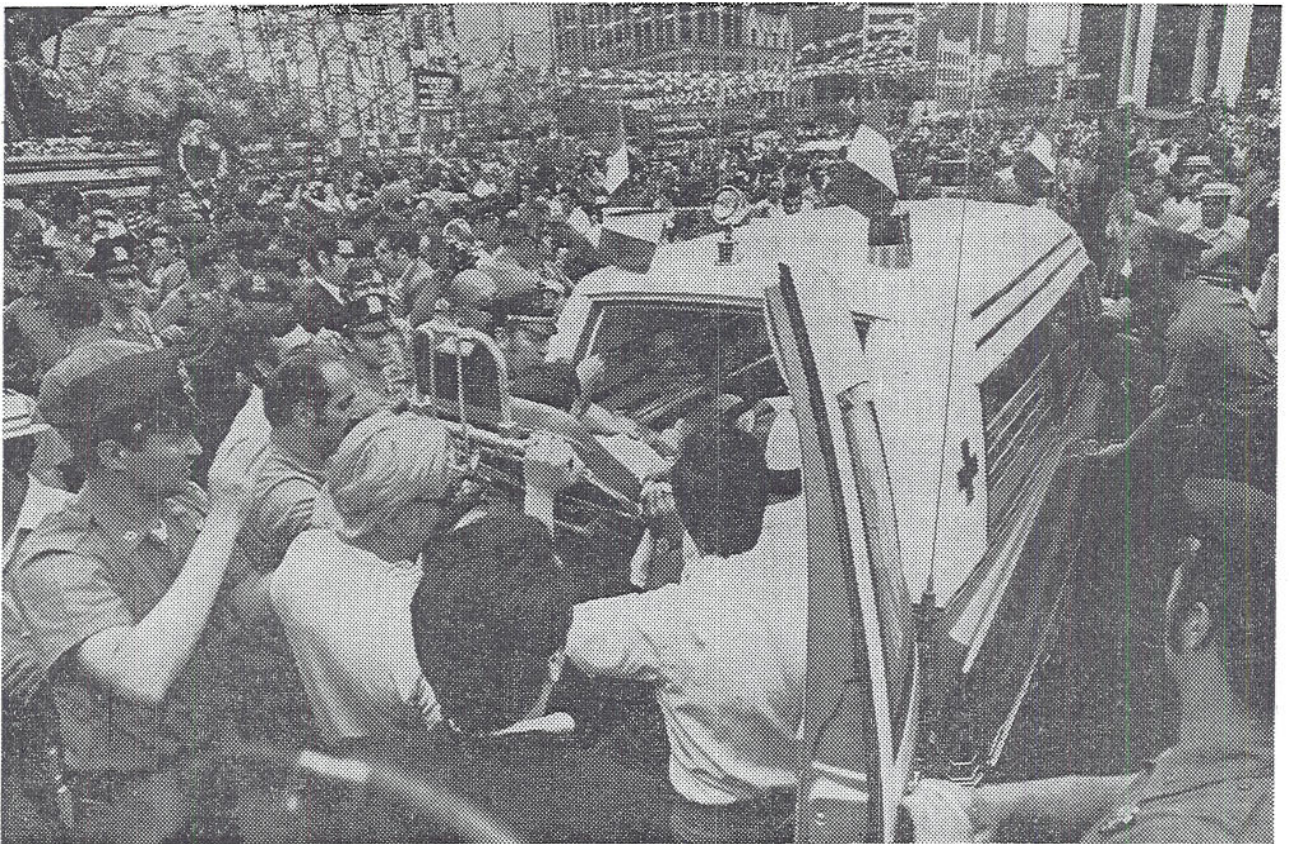
Officials of the civil rights league repeatedly implored the crowd to remain orderly and exhorted them in the name of Italian unity.

Within 45 minutes after the shooting, the Unity Day program began on schedule, at noon, and soon persons were leaning against the barricades that cordoned off the site of the shooting.

Dr. Hanson, the attending

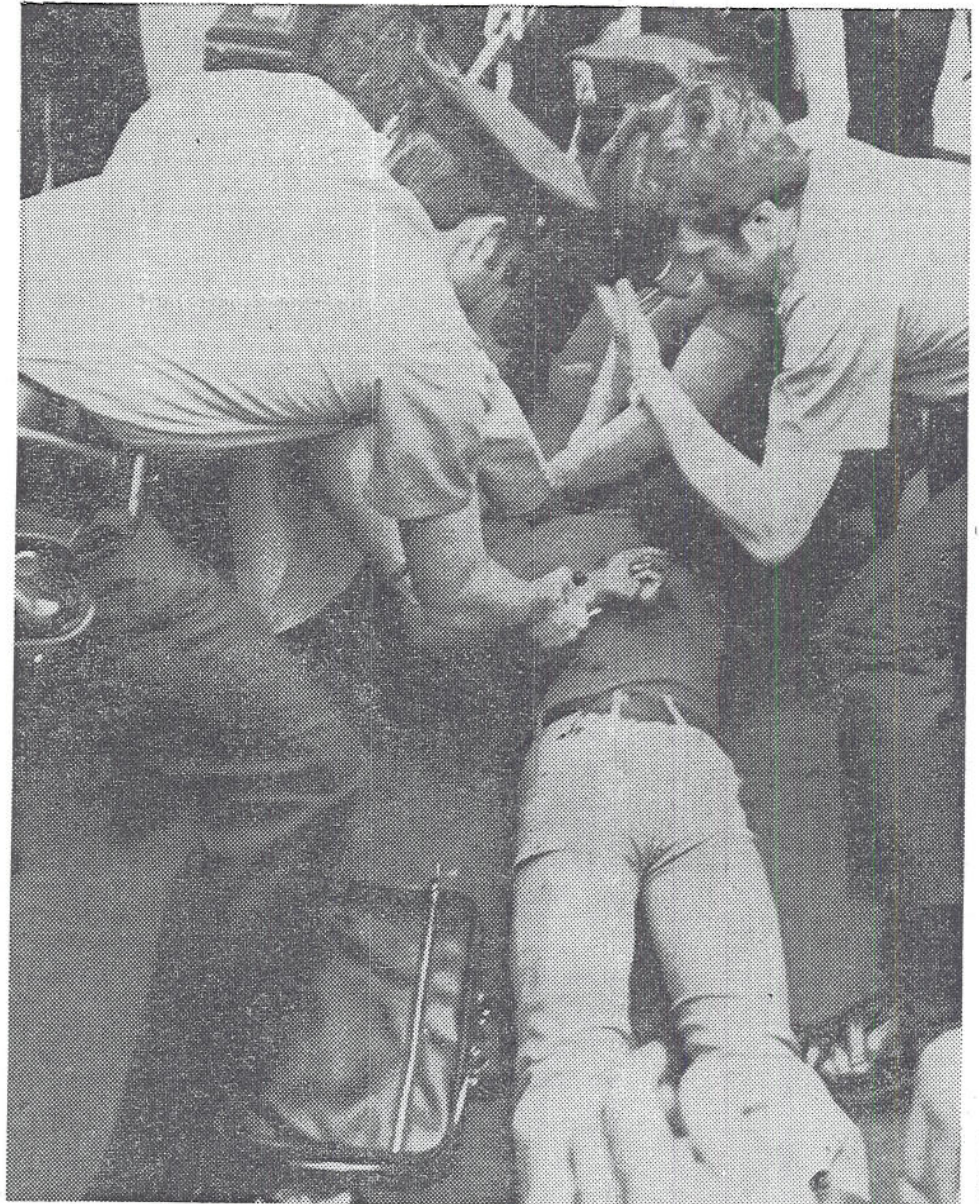


JOINING HANDS IN UNITY, participants in the rally at Columbus Circle say a prayer for Joseph A. Colombo S



VICTIM OF SHOOTING IS REMOVED: Colombo being put into an ambulance for the trip to Roosevelt Hospital

Photographs for The New York Times by WILLIAM E. SAURO



United Press International

ALLEGED ASSAILANT SHOT: Joseph A. Colombo Sr.'s apparent attacker, identified by police as Jerome A. Johnson of New Brunswick, N.J., was shot fatally at scene. The bag beside him, found to contain lapel pins of the Unity Day rally and a pistol, was picked up by a man who said he was looking for Mr. Colombo's bag. Police questioned him.

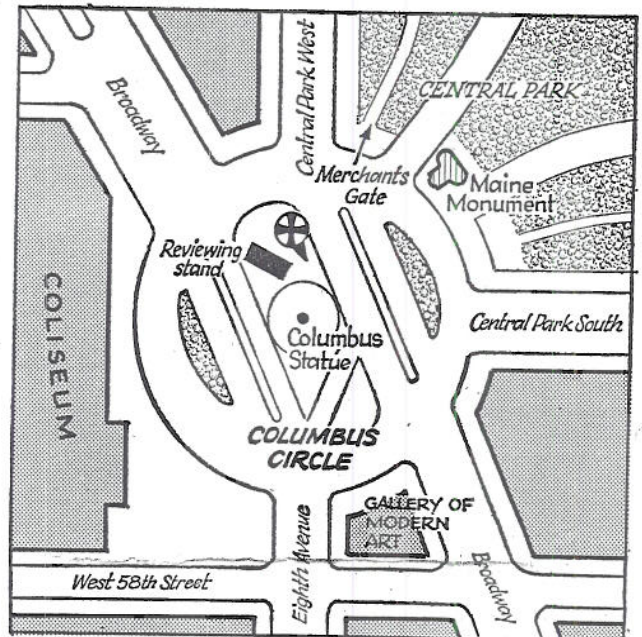
neurosurgeon, described Colombo's operation at a news conference. The major wound was caused by a bullet that entered the left back of the head to a depth of three to four inches and lodged near the midline of the cerebellum's hemispheres. Major vascular surfaces were damaged.

The second slug was removed from the back of the neck. A third slug, near the lateral side of the left jaw, was not considered critical and was left in Colombo by surgeons.

"The problem is how much intrinsic damage was done" during the period of heavy bleeding and clotting before the operation, Dr. Hanson said.

Outside the hospital, near the corner of Ninth Avenue and 58th Street, a group of 25 men, four women and two children marched in a slow oval, reciting prayers, the Hail Mary and The Lord's Prayer.

"St. Jude help Joe Colombo, St. Joseph protect him," they chanted. A breeze kept blowing out religious candles they carried.



The New York Times

June 29, 1971

Cross shows spot where Joseph A. Colombo Sr. was shot