

MOBSTERS AND CUBAN GUN-RUNNING

A Report on Jack Ruby's Secret Life

By William Scott Malone
New Times

Washington

JANUARY, 1967, Jack Ruby, the man who killed Lee Harvey Oswald, sat in a Dallas jail cell, dying of cancer. But he was less troubled by his circumstances than by one consuming fear: that people would find out about him, because there was still much to learn. He told a visitor, "They're going to find out about my trips to Cuba . . . and the guns and everything." That's what worried Jack Ruby most in the months before he died: that they would find out.

In the decade since his death, the secrets Ruby guarded have remained well kept. But now it is possible to piece some of them together. And what emerges is an unavoidable conclusion: contrary to the findings of the Warren Commission, Jack Ruby was involved with some of the most prominent mobsters in America, the same ones used by the CIA in several unsuccessful attempts to kill Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

The most pertinent FBI documents were not in the Kennedy assassination file and were not provided to the Warren Commission. Much of the new evidence about Ruby is to be found in the FBI's files on Cuba and on organized crime.

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JACK RUBY's story, as it is now emerging, is the story of a man who tried all his life to ingratiate himself to men like mob leader Santos Trafficante — and who, to some extent, succeeded. Ruby bore absolutely no resemblance to the picture of a patriotic nightclub owner painted by the Warren Commission. He was born and raised on Chicago's tough West Side, where he became known to police as a brawler, a seller of hot merchandise and a general troublemaker. As a teenager he ran numbers for Al Capone.

Luis Kutner, a Chicago lawyer who worked with the Kefauver Committee, says Ruby hobnobbed with Chicago mob boss Sam Giancana and his crowd during the late 1930's. Then, after a brief stint in the Army, Ruby moved to Texas in 1947 as part of a Chicago mob move into the lucrative Dallas racket. He became known as "the pay-off man for the Dallas Police Department," and a man who "had the fix with the county authorities," according to FBI documents quoting members of the Dallas underworld.

By the late 1950s, according to his own Warren Commission testimony, Ruby had developed a particular affinity for all things Cuban. That was where the money was and that was where the Mafia was. It was through his Cuban intrigues that Ruby's trail crossed those of some

of the most powerful organized crime bosses in America. Cuba was the connecting thread.

DURING the late 1950s, the Mafia followed a curious strategy in Cuba. The same American mobsters who would later join with the CIA in a conspiracy to kill Castro were actually supplying his rebel army with guns. It wasn't that the American gangsters wanted Castro to overthrow Fulgencio Batista's government. (The corrupt Batista was a good friend of the mob.) They were merely buying themselves some insurance. If they helped Castro, they reasoned, he would protect their considerable interests should he ever come to power.

One of the major participants in the syndicate's attempt to hedge its bets in the explosive Cuban political situation was Norman (Roughhouse) Rothman. Beginning in 1958, Rothman, a strapping Havana-based mobster and one of Santos Trafficante's closest associates, coordinated the smuggling of arms to Castro. Simultaneously, Rothman was splitting his take from Cuba's slot machines with Batista's brother-in-law. The available evidence indicates that Ruby helped in Rothman's gun smuggling.

Ruby was connected even more directly to Rothman's operations by a Miami FBI informant named Blaney Mack Johnson. Johnson told the FBI that Ruby was "active in arranging illegal flights of weapons from Miami to Castro forces in Cuba," and that he was reportedly part-owner of two planes used to make the flights.

Johnson named Eddie Browder as a gunrunning pilot involved with Ruby in the operation. Browder, a flamboyant Miami arms dealer, was Rothman's main operative in the gun smuggling.

according to various federal court documents.

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ONE OF the more interesting names that pops up in Browder's FBI file is that of Frank Sturgis, better known as one of the Watergate burglars. Sturgis was then a swashbuckling soldier of fortune, a gunrunner for Castro and, according to several sources, a close associate of Normie Rothman.

The gun smuggling began in mid-May 1958, and continued full-throttle that summer, with Browder, Sturgis and others traveling up to Alexandria, Virginia, to buy rifles and machine guns from the International Armament Corporation (then a CIA proprietary) with crisp hundred-dollar bills. They transported the arms in station

wagons and small trucks to secret drop-off points in the Florida Keys. There, the guns were stored until they could be picked up and smuggled into Cuba.

Sturgis' memory seems quickly to fade at the mention of Ruby and Rothman, and documents relating to Ruby's gun trafficking have mysteriously disappeared from federal government files. A 1958 letter from a Jack Rubenstein (Ruby's real name, which he often used in connection with his Cuban activities) to the State Department's Office of Munitions Controls, "requesting permission to negotiate the purchase of firearms and ammunition from an Italian firm," though discovered by the State Department in a 1963 file search, is, inexplicably missing from the files today. And a 1959 Army Intelligence report on U.S. arms dealers listing a "Jack Rubenstein" also cannot be located, although it, too, Army Intelligence clerks found, was around in 1963.

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ALTHOUGH Ruby's involvement in the gun-running was minor, he later told his psychiatrist and lawyers that he feared his role would be revealed and he would be considered unpatriotic, even communistic. Ruby was not alone. Of all the Americans who helped Castro before the revolution, very few talk openly of their involvement. Most simply deny it.

The reason, of course, is that their efforts were enormously successful. American guns helped the revolution succeed. They started arriving in the summer of 1958, and a few months later, on New Year's Day, 1959, Fidel Castro marched into Havana. Batista was overthrown and fled to the Dominican Republic, and his patron, mob chieftain Meyer Lansky, left quickly for Miami.

Lansky, described by knowledgeable crime reporters as the chairman of the board of the national crime syndicate, a loose confederation of America's top organized-crime families, was forced to flee because of his conspicuous friendship with Batista. He left behind his good friend Trafficante to make sure that business continued as usual.

But Fidel Castro was determined to rid Cuba of the American Mafia. Shortly after taking over, he announced to a small group of his advisers that he intended to nationalize the casinos and other American business interests.

Sturgis says he specifically warned Trafficante, known to American authorities as the kingpin of narcotics in the Caribbean, of Castro's plans. But Trafficante did not heed the warning, telling Sturgis, "Not in this world; you think he's going to close up a hundred million dollars' worth of business that we got? . . . He'll never do it."

But Santos Trafficante was soon to learn otherwise. Sturgis, on Castro's orders, closed down the gambling casinos for ten days as a warning of what was in store. The Mafia began to get the message. And, while Castro reopened the

casinos on a limited basis in March 1959, the underworld knew that it was in for rough times in Cuba. The crowning blow came in April, when Castro had Trafficante, the undisputed boss of the Havana underworld, arrested and thrown in prison.

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SOON AFTERWARD, according to FBI sources, at a meeting of the national crime syndicate, Meyer Lansky placed a \$1 million contract on the life of Fidel Castro. Present at the meeting was the rotund gangland boss of Chicago, Sam Giancana, who was to become a central figure in the CIA plots against Castro.

It was around this time that Jack Ruby apparently became a frequent visitor to Cuba, developing connections to several of Trafficante's lieutenants, as well as to Trafficante himself.

The Warren Report, though, merely reiterated Ruby's story that he made only one trip to Cuba — a pleasure trip in 1959. But FBI reports indicate that Ruby may have traveled to Havana six or more times. It wasn't hard to visit Cuba secretly in those days, leaving behind no records of the journey. The only document required to enter Cuba was a \$2.50 "tourist card" that could be filled in with any name one chose.

Ruby told the Warren Commission that his "one" trip to Cuba was purely a social visit at the invitation of his best friend, Lewis J. McWillie. As Ruby testified, he "idolized" McWillie — and McWillie, in turn, told the FBI that he treated Ruby as "one would a brother."

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ACCORDING TO FBI reports, McWillie had run several illegal gambling houses in the Dallas area before moving to Cuba in the summer of 1958. Arriving in Havana, McWillie was promptly hired by Rothman as a pitboss in Trafficante's San Souci casino. In September 1958, McWillie moved to the Tropicana casino, described at the time as "the largest nightclub in the world."

McWillie's boss, Trafficante, was arrested in Havana in April, 1959. In late April or early May, saying it was a "life and death matter," Jack Ruby tracked down Robert McKeown, a convicted gun smuggler and an intimate of Fidel Castro. According to FBI interviews, Ruby told McKeown that he was attempting to get three people out of a Cuban prison. He said that if McKeown could facilitate their release, he would be paid \$5000 per person, adding that someone in Las Vegas would finance the operation.

A short time later, Ruby visited McWillie in Cuba. And on July 8, 1959, Castro ordered the deportation of three prisoners: Loran Hall, Henry Saavedra and Santos Trafficante.

His campaign to free Santos Trafficante placed Ruby in some fast company. Others who wanted Trafficante released included Johnny Roselli and his boss, Sam Giancana — both of whom, says a House Assassinations Committee memorandum, visited Trafficante in jail in 1959. A close friend of both Roselli and Giancana, who testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee, says Roselli told him, "Ruby was hooked up with Trafficante in the rackets in Havana."

Roselli's version of the Kennedy assassination, as told to Jack Anderson, is worth noting. "When Oswald was picked up, Roselli suggested the underworld conspirators feared he would crack and disclose information that might lead to them. This almost certainly would have brought a massive U.S. crackdown on the Mafia. So Jack Ruby was ordered to eliminate Oswald . . ."

Ruby's own version of events seems to coincide with Roselli's. While in jail in 1965, Ruby told his psychiatrist, Dr. Warner Teuter, that he had been part of a conspiracy to kill Kennedy that involved "high government agencies."

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IN LOOKING for possible connections between the mob and Kennedy's assassination, it is worth remembering that one of Sam Giancana's major obsessions was the Kennedy assault on organized crime.

The Washington Post recently reported a chilling conversation between Santos Trafficante

and a young Cuban exile, Jose Aleman, that allegedly occurred in September 1962. Aleman says it started as a business discussion, but when it turned to the subject of John Kennedy, Trafficante's relaxed mood quickly changed.

"Have you seen how his brother is hitting Hoffa, a man who is a worker, and who is not a millionaire, a friend of the blue collars?" Trafficante said. "He doesn't know this kind of encounter is very delicate. Mark my words, this man Kennedy is in trouble, and he will get what is coming to him . . . He is going to be hit." Aleman says he told the FBI about Trafficante's little indiscretion before Kennedy was gunned down in Dallas. The FBI has yet to comment on the matter.

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BUT HOUSE Assassinations Committee investigators say Aleman is sticking to his story. And Santos Trafficante is not taking it very well. House investigators say that when they arrived to serve Trafficante with his subpoena last March, he was actually trembling.

And with good reason. In June, 1975, Sam Giancana was killed by seven bullets in the face one week before he was slated to testify before the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Then, in April 1976, Johnny Roselli testified secretly before the Senate Intelligence subcommittee investigating the Kennedy assassination. Two months later, his mutilated body was found floating in Miami's Dumbfounding Bay, stuffed in an oil drum.

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From *New Times Magazine*