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Rosselli Called a Victim of Mafia Because of His Senate Testimony

By NICHOLAS GAGE

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 Dumfoundling Bay and found Mr. Rosselli's body inside, there was no shortage of suspects, ranging from the C.I.A. to Cuban agents or the Mafia itself.

However, two men known to have had personal knowledge of the circumstances of the murder have provided solid information that Mr. 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 Mr. Rosselli's death that are strongly supported by physical evidence uncovered in an extensive investigation by The New York Times, which involved the examination of numerous documents, including Mr. Rosselli's testimony about the Kennedy assassination, and scores of interviews.

A Picture of Rise and Fall

The investigation provided as well a picture of Mr. Rosselli's rise and fall within the Mafia and a rare insight into the operation of organized crime.

Early speculation that the C.I.A. 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. Mr. Giancana was killed shortly before he was to be summoned before the Senate Committee on Intelligence.

Mr. 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 C.I.A. 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 Mr. 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 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 plots against Mr. Castro and later a chief aide to the late Howard R. 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.

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

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

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

Mr. Rosselli testified that he had told some people he believed that Fidel Castro was behind the Kennedy assassination. When asked by Michael Epstein, a member of the committee's staff, if he had "any facts" to back up his supposition, he replied: "No facts."

The possibility that the C.I.A. may have had Mr. 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 Mr. Rosselli's only source of income—\$60,000 a year—at the time of his death.

Mr. Breen said the C.I.A. would not have killed Mr. Rosselli over his Senate committee testimony because he had checked with the C.I.A., including Bill Harvey, "his C.I.A. contact—prior to his appearance, and they told him to tell whatever he knew "because it was going to come out anyway." The C.I.A. agent said, "would have no reason to kill him."

No Check With Mafia

Mr. 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 Mr. 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 Mr. Rosselli was suspected—correctly, as it turned out—of having secretly provided information to the prosecution.

The Mafia figure said that shortly after Mr. 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 Mr. 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.

Confirmation by Mafia Source

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 F.B.I. 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 Mr. Rosselli were not related to the reasons for Sam Giancana's murder, although the same Mafia group, the Chicago family, was responsible.

Mr. 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 Mr. 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."

Mr. Rosselli's friends and relatives con-

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173