

“Just send the guy to California”

By R. Marc Kantrowitz
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On March 23, 1939, a Philadelphia jury returned a guilty verdict against Herman Petrillo, captivating the nation in what had been dubbed “the Great Arsenic Murder Trial.” Charged with the murder of Ferdinand Alfonsi, Petrillo was the first to be tried and sentenced to death. His co-defendant, Stella Alfonsi, would be tried later for her role in her husband’s painful death. With numerous other trials remaining, the public would not be disappointed.

The main players in the “You’re tired of your spouse, allow us to aid you” ring included cousins Herman and Paul Petrillo and Morris “Louie the Rabbi” Bolber, who when not teaching Hebrew school and training young Jewish students studying for their bar and bat mitzvahs, was arranging various murders.

The owner of a tailor shop in Philadelphia, Paul Petrillo spoke with, and learned from, the many clients who frequented his shop. From those selling insurance to the poor immigrants in the immediate area, he quickly discovered that money could be made with little effort. Soon he was selling life insurance policies and collecting his clients’ weekly 50 cent installments. His younger cousin Herman far less subtly joined Paul in his lust to make a quick buck. Not bothering to engage in any semblance of legitimate work, the conniving conman Herman employed whatever illegality suited his needs, with arson and counterfeiting topping his crimes of choice.

The authorities were soon onto Herman. When an insured house under his wife’s name mysteriously burned down, Herman was charged with arson. Despite being connected to a cache of dynamite, he was acquitted. Leaving the courtroom, Herman both mocked the fire marshal — “What d’ya think now, flatfoot?” — and then traveled to the insurance company to collect the \$3,000 in insurance proceeds.

With the success of his efforts, Herman proposed expanding his horizons to include his cousin, suggesting they kill those for whom Paul held policies, or in Herman’s quaint vernacular: “Just send the guy to California.” Paul demurred, more due to his distrust of his cousin’s reckless ways than the wisdom of his suggestion.

Not one to be slowed, Herman befriended a disabled 50-year-old vagrant, Ralph Caruso. Finding him a place to stay, Herman arranged with the insurance agents who hung out in Paul's tailor shop to sell the illiterate Ralph life insurance policies that Herman paid for, along with the rent, and made himself the beneficiary. Accumulating a sizable nest egg of \$3,000 in insurance, Herman decided the time was right to send Ralph to California via a local river. With a cohort, Salvatore Sortino, Herman drowned Caruso, who was found the next day.

When Herman tried to cash in, suspicions arose. The insurance companies balked, agreeing only to pay funeral expenses. Herman begrudgingly agreed, but in double-billing the companies on the amply padded funeral expenses, he walked away with a not-too-shabby \$700, or about \$13,000 in today's money.

Some months later, he replicated the scheme by killing John Woloshyn, on whose life John's wife, Marie, had purchased several policies. That Herman was sleeping with Marie made his suggestion to purchase the policies fairly persuasive. The police concluded that John was the victim of a hit and run, which it most assuredly was, but not in the traditional sense. Herman, his 250-pound friend "Jumbo" Valenti, and John traveled in Herman's car to an after-hours joint. There, Jumbo proceeded to hit Woloshyn over the head with a lead pipe and dragged him in front of the car, at which point Herman proceeded to run him over several times.

The Russian-born Morris "Louie the Rabbi" Bolber rounded out the group. Rotund and sloppy in dress, the 40-ish-year-old Bolber held himself out as a scholar, mystic and wise man who spoke several languages. Married with four children, he even advised Salvatore Sortino, who aided in the killing of killing Ralph Caruso. Sortino, suffering from a run of bad luck, sought to change his fortunes. Bolber told him to put an egg under his arm for nine days. It must have worked, as Sortino came back for additional advice.

Given mutual connections and a fondness for the occult, Bolber and Paul Petrillo became close friends and partners in crime, with each catering and exploiting the superstitions of the local populace.

Over the next few years, as word spread that Petrillo and Bolber had magic in their veins, women sought out the pair, seeking advice as to how to address different marital problems. Petrillo and Bolber provided life insurance as well as magic powders. The packets contained arsenic that the wife, as dutifully instructed, put in her husband's food or drink. Some of the wives were merely dupes, doing as told and relying on the healing power of those providing the advice. But others

were neck deep and fully aware of what they were doing: ridding themselves of a problem and making some decent money in depression-hardened times. The ringleaders always got their cut of the insurance money. Indeed, at times they took the entire amount, leaving the widow both husband-less and even poorer.

The murder of Ferdinando Alfonsi broke open a case that quickly mushroomed. Ferdinando, a cement contractor who saw his business disappear during the depression, became a day laborer to help provide for his attractive and angry wife, Stella, and their two young sons. Befriending Herman Petrillo, Ferdinando leapt at the opportunity for easier, more lucrative work, moving counterfeit money and stolen goods.

Stella had good reason to be mad, bitter that her father sold her at age 17 to Ferdinando, who was 10 years older, for \$2,000. She was young and pretty and liked to have a good time. And she certainly did not need the company of her loveless husband, with whom she fought and occasionally left once for four years.

Herman Petrillo, who liked the ladies almost as much as his criminal ways, saw an opening and quickly ingratiated himself with her. With two life insurance policies in hand, Herman knew what had to be done, as did Stella. If offering a good friend presented a moral dilemma, it was quickly solved when Herman decided to have someone else do the killing. He recruited an ex-con, George Myer, on the good word of another ex-con.

Unfortunately for Herman, Myer was also an informant. Hoping to ingratiate himself with the feds, who wanted Herman for his counterfeiting ways, Myer brought them in. Soon, Myer and undercover agent Stanley Phillips were dealing with Herman, plotting murder and counterfeiting schemes. Needless to say, the Phillips-Myer team had no interest in knocking off Ferdinando and continually put off the hit, meeting frequently with Herman to endlessly discuss how best to do it. Eschewing the tried-and-true arsenic route, Herman went over what worked so well in the past — a trip to a river or a hit-and-run accident combined with the equally lethal lead pipe to the head. With much dithering and little happening, Herman grew tired of the wait.

When Myer and Phillips later met Herman at a bus station in New Jersey to pick up bogus money, Ferdinando's name again came up. This time, though, Herman told them not to worry about it.

As Ferdinando writhed in pain, his eyes bulging and his insides exploding, his seemingly loving wife dabbed at his forehead to comfort him. He mercifully died.

While an arrested Stella clammed up, Herman, surprisingly, opened up, selling everyone but himself down the river. He told of all the people who were “Petrillo-ized,” including Rose “the Kiss of Death” Carina, who killed three spouses and was in the process of killing no. 4, and Carina “the Wicked Witch of North Philadelphia” Favato, who killed her husband, then murdered her teenage stepson and a third victim, the husband of a neighbor.

With the body count at 20, the ADA could not keep up with the litany of victims and defendants. Soon, several of the defendants were talking. Over the course of 1939, there were trials and pleas for a mass of women, nearly all of whom were uneducated, unattractive, and unassuming. All, that is, except Stella, who was smart, cunning, and shrewd.

When Stella didn’t like her court-appointed attorney, she demanded and got a new one, Raymond Pace Alexander, who was highly respected and extremely competent. He was also Black and would be the first of his race to try a capital case.

Stella’s trial, which was substantial yet circumstantial, started in October. The insurance agent testified about meeting with Stella but that she would not allow him to meet with her husband. The treating doctor told of Stella not wanting her very ill husband to go to the hospital. Myer outlined the plot to kill the victim. The toxicology results indicated a deadly amount of arsenic. And Carina Favato, now a cooperating witness, testified that she got the poison from Herman and gave it to Stella.

Despite the onslaught of evidence knocking them to the ground, Alexander and his client rose to the occasion. Alexander stressed the unworthiness of some of the state’s obvious unsavory witnesses; that Stella (unlike many of the other defendants who made incriminating statements to the police) never admitted to anything; and persuasively and fortuitously that the insurance policies had recently lapsed prior to Ferdinando’s death due to non-payment, thus eliminating a motive for the killing. Moreover, the comely defendant held sway. “A picture of poise, ebony-haired Stella Alfonsi took the witness stand yesterday,” one newspaper reported, “and [calmly told the jury that those who testified against her had lied].” Even a lengthy and withering cross-examination did not derail her.

The verdict: not guilty.

Epilogue

When all was said and done, the cast of characters could have come from an engrossing film noir, highlighting sordid backgrounds, human frailties, and tales hardly worthy of belief. Justice, for the most part, prevailed with Paul and Herman Petrillo dying in the electric chair, and Bolber receiving a life sentence instead of death for his cooperation. He died in prison in 1954.

Some of the women got off, including Rose “the Kiss of Death” Carina, who was also brilliantly represented by Alexander, whom she stiffed on his fee.

The above column is based on “Poison Widows” by George Cooper and other internet sources. R. Marc Kantrowitz, a retired Appellate Court judge, can be contacted at Rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.



The cousins Herman and Paul Petrillo.



Paul Petrillo.



Morris "Louie the Rabbi" Bolber.