

Kid Twist goes flying

This is the first of two parts.



By R. Marc Kantrowitz

Abe "Kid Twist" Reles sat in jail and mulled his options. Charged with murder, he faced the electric chair. Deciding that he would rather sing than fry, he cut a deal.

As he flew out the sixth-floor window of his police-protected hotel on Coney Island, however, he might have been wiser to risk the chair.

Reles was born in 1906 to Sam Reles, a tailor, and Rose Schulman, two immigrants from Austria who settled, like millions of other Jewish immigrants, in Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Hoping to perhaps escape the crime-ridden neighborhood, the Reles family regrettably relocated to Brownsville, a lawless section of Brooklyn.

There, young Abe found his calling: theft, felonious assault, armed robbery, burglary and grand larceny. While he often served time, most of his cases were dismissed for lack of evidence, the police quickly discovering that witnesses against Reles tended to disappear or suffer from sudden memory loss.

Even a thug like Reles quickly realized that the true money and prestige were in organized crime. Aligning himself with other equally brutal and ambitious criminals — Martin "Bugsy" Goldstein and Harry "Pittsburgh Phil" Strauss — he set his sights on taking over all of Brownsville.

Standing in his way were the Shapiro brothers — Meyer, Irving and Willie.

Soon Reles cut a deal with a rival gang, run by the dour Harry "Happy" Maione and his second in command, Frank "Dasher" Abbando. Together they sought approval for taking out the Shapiros with the head of all of Brooklyn crime, Umberto Albert Anastasia.

Anastasia ran the docks of Brooklyn through which one-third of America's foreign trade passed.

Anastasia gave his blessing, and in 1934 Reles eliminated the Shapiros. Now in control of Brownsville, he expanded his gang, bringing in, among others, the 420-pound loan shark Louis "Tiny" Benson; car thief Sholem Bernstein; Oscar "The Poet" Cohen, who, when he wasn't dealing stolen goods, was reading classical poetry; and

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Orthodox Jew Samuel "Red" Levine, a hit man who refused to kill on the Sabbath.

As big as Anastasia was, he paled in comparison with the man J. Edgar Hoover named the most dangerous criminal in all of America: Louis "Lepke" Buchalter. In 1932, at the age of 35, Buchalter made \$10 million controlling all the rackets in New York City.

Among fellow gangsters, Buchalter was considered a great intellect, due in no small part to his educational achievements, having graduated the 7th grade. A devoted family man, he didn't drink, smoke, gamble or cheat on his beloved wife.

Looking for muscle to break a labor strike or handle other matters that required brute force, Buchalter turned to Anastasia and Reles.

The expansion of "Murder Incorporated" soon followed. More often than not, the victims of the mob were fellow lowlifes.

Take John "Spider" Murtha, whose resume included gouging out the eyeball of a rival and committing five murders, one of which involved killing a woman who innocently declined an offer of a drink. His plan to take on Reles was met with two shots in the head and three in the chest, administered on March 3, 1935, by Abbando and Max "The Jerk" Golob.

Two years later, when their business associate and friend Walter Sage, who controlled all gambling in the Catskills, was suspected of dipping into the profits, Pittsburgh Phil Strauss stabbed him 32 times with an ice pick. Dropped into a lake, Sage quickly sank thanks to the slot machine tied to his body.

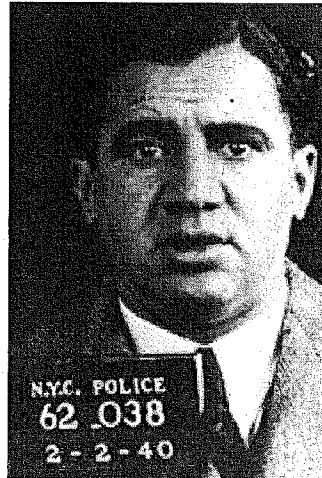
The year 1940 proved to be the end of Reles' tumultuous criminal career. It was then that Harry Rudolph, a gravely ill convict, decided to seek justice and exact vengeance and told the police the story of the 1933 gangland murder of his friend, 19-year-old Alex "Red" Albert, who had gotten into an argument with Strauss over jewelry Albert stole and wanted Strauss to fence.

The disagreement was settled that night when Reles and two others lured Albert to a location where bullets and death awaited him. A case was developed, murder indictments were secured and Reles was looking at the electric chair.

Reles didn't like what he saw, and on Good Friday he sent his pregnant wife to District Attorney William O'Dwyer. Reles wanted to make a deal.

And what a deal he made.

(Next week's column looks at how the heavily guarded Reles came to fly out of the sixth-floor window of Coney Island's Half Moon Hotel.)



ABE 'KID TWIST' RELES

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