

Curious flight of Kid Twist spawns questions, few answers

This is the second of two parts. Last week's column looked at the life of crime that Abe "Kid Twist" Reles led and his decision to testify against the mob.

By R. Marc Kantrowitz



In exchange for Abe "Kid Twist" Reles' cooperation, District Attorney William O'Dwyer agreed to walk the man he believed to be

"the most effective informer in the annals of criminal justice." A pass for every murder and crime committed. The price was exorbitant, but Reles kept his end of the bargain.

Over the course of two weeks, Reles proved to be not only a gifted killer but one possessing an astounding memory; able to recall in minute detail the scores of crimes in which he was involved. In short order he solved 85 murders.

Soon he was in court testifying, first against former close associates Harry "Happy" Maione and Frank "Dasher" Abbandando, and in a

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second trial against Martin "Bug-gy" Goldstein and Harry "Pitts-burgh Phil" Strauss. All four were found guilty of murder and sent to the chair.

The crime world was in a tizzy, with mobsters including Brooklyn crime boss Umberto Albert Anastasia dropping out of sight.

Reles knew he was a marked man and greatly feared for his safety. So, too, did DA O'Dwyer, who, with the police, devised a seemingly foolproof protection plan.

Reles and three other turncoats — Allie Tannenbaum, Sholem Bernstein and Mickey Sycoff — were sequestered in Coney Island's majestic 400-room Half Moon Hotel, comprised of a 16-story center section flanked by 11-story side wings. The east wing of the sixth floor was sealed off with a bulletproof door, which served as the sole entrance and exit to the 10-room fortress. Handpicked officers provided around-the-clock security, five in the suite and others in the lobby. Reles was alone in Room 623, safe and secure.

Nov. 12, 1941, was a Wednesday. Inside the hotel lobby and away from the cold and dark 4:30 morning, a bellhop chatted with two cops. A second hotel employee snoozed nearby. Suddenly a loud thud shook him awake. The four, not anxious to venture out in the el-

ements, theorized that a car had jumped the curb and struck the building. No one was particularly interested and nothing was done.

Two and a half hours later, at around 7 a.m., another employee arrived at work, glanced outside and jolted at the sight of a lifeless body

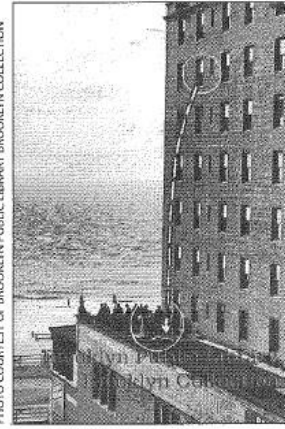


ABE 'KID TWIST' RELES

sprawled on the ground. The police on the sixth floor were alerted and rushed to Reles' room. Word of their discovery quickly spread throughout the city: "Abe went out the window!"

The respected police Capt. John McGowan quickly took charge of the investigation. Inexplicably, he failed to seal off the crime scene, secure the physical evidence, and interview hotel guests and employees. He severely limited the police photographer, who took a single photo of the body, which had already been slightly moved.

McGowan failed to sequester the five guards, who, within earshot of each other, told a similar tale: Reles was routinely checked, the last time



HALF MOON HOTEL

LAW 'n HISTORY

at around 7 a.m.

By evening the case was solved. Reles died trying to escape. He had tied a bed sheet from his room, flung it out the window, attempted to climb down to an empty room below and somehow lost his grip, falling 52 feet to his death.

Questions burst forth from the press and public, which went unanswered. Why would Reles, who was petrified of the mob, try to escape? How did he know the room below

was empty? Even if he had gained entrance there, how was he going to waltz past the guards in the lobby?

Why did he have only \$2.35 in his pockets? Why was no one else identified outside, waiting to whisk him away? Why would he plan his escape in broad daylight? Why didn't anyone see him?

How did he have the stamina to climb out the window and shimmy down a sheet when he had just spent nine days in the hospital for chronic lung disease? What was that thud heard at 4:30? And why did he land so far from the building if he merely fell?

As far as the police were concerned, the case was closed. They were well rid of him. Instead of shedding tears, they lifted a toast when Reles was buried.

And that was the end of a man who only shortly before had been crowned the greatest informer in history.

Epilogue

We'll never know who killed Abe "Kid Twist" Reles. Clearly many wanted him dead, from mobsters to crooked politicians and police on the take.

Was it the guards? If so, why didn't any show signs of financial prosperity? Or was it the three other turncoats, upset for any variety of petty reasons or perhaps pulling off what surely would have been the ultimate inside job?