

CHAPTER SIX

BIG FRANK'S WAR: THE SOHO FIREBOMBS

CHANGING attitudes from the 1950s were key to the increased liberalism and major reforms on matters of sexual behaviour throughout the next decade, most notably with legal reforms that would follow the Wolfenden Commission. The introduction of the Street Offences Act of 1959, which sought to prevent the public nuisance of having prostitutes loitering on pavements, had the inadvertent effect of turning street prostitutes into call girls – a legal development that now allowed pimps to control their girls by placing them inside ‘business flats’, further keeping them out of sight.

Under the 1959 Street Offences Act, the maximum sentence for living on immoral earnings was increased to seven years, up from the two years that was given only on a second conviction. Up to 1948 it had been possible on a second conviction for a Court to add a sentence of whipping in addition to imprisonment. But these punishments were inadequate to cover cases where there was an element of coercion, whether physical or mental, into prostitution. Still, Maltese pimps were among the first to feel the force of the law. For Manchester café owner Victor Frendo, 22, a four-year sentence for forcing a 16-year-old girl to work the streets would no longer be considered “severe” by the courts, a point elaborated in an appeals decision by Lord Parker, the Lord Chief Justice.¹

Fines of £60 for pavement soliciting and imprisonment kept the women away from the streets, but they were now located safely inside top-floor properties – a win-win for flat-farmer Bernie Silver and his Maltese partners. Typed postcards outside newsagents or in telephone booths advertised what was on sale, a novelty made possible in a world where the telephone had

become available to the masses. Now prostitution behind closed doors had become impossible to police.²

British society itself had been turned into a voyeur of the lives of those for whom commercialised sex was a matter of course. The Profumo affair introduced the public to Soho dancer Christine Keeler and one of the most sordid scandals to hit the Macmillan administration: a Soviet naval attaché, and the minister for war John Profumo, had been linked by sexual association to the same courtesan and Keeler's exploiter, the osteopath Dr Stephen Ward. In 1963, an entire nation got to peep through the keyhole as all major newspapers reported every single word from Lord Denning's report on 'The Circumstances Leading to the Resignation of the Former Secretary of State for War, Mr J.D. Profumo'. The scandal – a minister's affair with a call girl who formed part of a circle of women 'managed' by Ward for the benefit of his powerful friends – marked a major embarrassment for the Conservative government.

But the will to waste police resources in criminalising extra-marital sex was also on its way out. The Street Offences Act dovetailed with a British genre of striptease that had been developing well before the 1960s, with impresarios managing to skirt the ban on nudity by ending their acts in complete nudity – strictly motionless – at the final chord of a musical routine right as the curtain dropped. The striptease impresario Paul Raymond, a captain of the 'skin' industry, sought to move his clubs further into the mainstream by giving his club foyers a glass-panelled doorway so that the public could be seen buying their entry tickets, therefore enhancing the transparency of the kind of entertainment he offered.³

What the new law did was to allow the private drinking clubs and gambling houses run by the organised vice outfits of the Maltese – which were technically private clubs with membership lists – to also become fronts for prostitution, where 'hostesses' sold overpriced drinks and watered-down alcohol in near-beer joints. Perhaps they would come back to a punter's hotel or a business flat to complete the successful evening. But the veiled promise of sex, with scantily clad hostesses lurking in

customers at the door, was a design to rip off visitors as much as possible.

The Maltese ruse was that punters were first charged an entrance fee, before proceeding to another level to pay a one-off membership fee of between 7 to 15 shillings. There they could enjoy a 'live show', where a simulated sex act would take place. The artists themselves would go from one club to the other as they provided individual performances.⁴ "It was a licence to print cash," said one former Maltese operator. "It was entirely passing trade – nobody ever came back – so tourists would come to the joint, pay entrance and membership, and you'd feed them some sexual entertainment. I don't know if the Maltese actually invented the game... but it was so lucrative, that the minute Big Frank or Bernie Silver learnt that some Maltese had managed to get their hands on a club, they would do what they can to get their cut or kick you out."⁵

Under the 1961 Licensing Act, the unsavoury Maltese could only use frontmen who could obtain police approval after background checks, to run their drinking clubs and strip-clubs.

But the legislation put out of business some 100 registered clubs, mostly one-room drinking clubs, owing to the fact that they were basements without an emergency exit. Many of these freshly vacant premises were taken up as strip-joints, hosting anything between 60 to 100 customers, who were charged both membership and entrance fees.⁶ "It was always a scam," says entrepreneur Howard Raymond, son of the famed Soho impresario Paul Raymond. "You'd go in a club, you were forced to buy a £100 bottle of champagne, pay for it there and then, and then it'd turn out to be fizzy water! Nobody would complain to the police because they didn't want people to know they had been in the club – surely not their wives."⁷

When the 1964 Refreshment Houses Act then required clubs serving any refreshment to be licensed, giving the police the right of entry, the Maltese did not renew their licences, and the 'clubs' became clip joints – the game was to lure in naive customers with an implicit understanding of the possibility of sexual intercourse. Men would be inveigled by girls on the premises with the faint

promise of sex. None of them had any intention of living up to the deal. Once the money is obtained, the men would be put off with various subterfuges until they realise they have been the victims of a confidence trick:

“Mostly the girl would persuade the punter that the address was some form of club and that her employer forbade her to leave before a certain time. She would then ask the man to wait around the corner to meet her as soon as she was free. Often the man would wait two or three hours before he realised he had been done up like a kipper... Another common scam of the time was the ‘blue film’ racket... the scenario was usually that of a smooth-talking spiv standing outside an open doorway and inviting tourists to see a blue film. As a come-on he might have postcards showing explicit scenes from the film. After taking the punters’ money he would direct them up to the second floor and then simply move on to another suitable doorway.”⁸

The entire Mifsud-Silver operation had been developed around a series of properties – some of them part of the portfolio of millionaire John Gaul, who had leased the island of Comino from the Maltese government in the early 1960s⁹ – and maximised to benefit the Syndicate: a basement would be used for the sale and screening of pornographic movies, the first floor would be a striptease club, and the top floor would be rented out to prostitutes – the set-up earned them thousands upon thousands a week. “They traded clubs around amongst themselves, always retaining a cut. It was always cash transactions. And paying the police – a certain element in the 1970s were bent police officers – was part of the game,” Howard Raymond recalls.

Controlling the Maltese clubs became an intractable problem for the police and licensing authorities: the Syndicate paid front men to accept responsibility for any breaches of the licensing conditions. “None of the normal records associated with a proper business, such as the names of employees and insurance and tax particulars, were kept and clearly the revenue authorities were being defrauded,” recalled Gilbert Kelland in his memoirs of his time as Superintendent for clubs at West Central. “We were

concerned because most of the people behind these dozen or so lucrative clubs – some of them in partnerships drawn up in the privacy of their solicitors' offices – were of bad character.”¹⁰

This kind of power was only consolidated by the opacity of property ownership in England and the Maltese Syndicate's ability to pay other men to appear as “fronts” for their establishments. Right up to the 1980s, it was only legal to actually search the land registry *with* the owner's permission; and if the owner could not be found, a stop order could not be served on illegal changes-of-use. When the Westminster Council would serve stop notices on the new striptease bars or porn cinemas for the illegal changes of use of traditional delis turned into erotic cinemas, these warnings were easily ignored because no owner could be found to be summoned in court.

This system of ‘deregulation’ allowed the Syndicate to control sex workers and ward off gang trouble: pimps and rent collectors made sure the prostitutes paid their rents, but none of these people were liable in court as leaseholders or property owners.

A system of bribes kept the forces of law – and gang violence – away. “Silver was the top man – he held the key to the police. Frank paid the Krays and the Richardsons, and he had his Maltese retinue,” one Maltese operator who worked for George Caruana and ran a striptease show, and could boast of having had drinks with the Krays, said. “So they were feared. If you're a ponce, you'd be terrified that they could put you away if you don't work for their clubs or rent their property. And if you opened a club which they did not have their hands on, you would be scared that they're going to hurt your or even kill you. They were greedy. But that's how lucrative these operations were – this was the 1960s, when property prices had yet to experience the 1980s boom.”¹¹

When they had no cash to give the Syndicate the key money to the flats, Big Frank Mifsud would lend pimps or prostitutes the money at 25% interest. “The way we worked at this time was to stand on street corners, get our customers and take them back to the flats. I used to work in Wardour Street on the corner of D'Arblay Street, and there were five other girls working this corner. One of the girls, a girl with long black hair, was living

with Bernie Silver. I think she was his wife. All the other girls used to talk about her being Bernie's girl because Bernie was becoming a big name in the West End," prostitute Barbara Dyer recalled.¹²

Prostitutes renting out the Syndicate's apartments stood to make around £25 a day, but could have to pay as much as £500 key money (€8,000 in 2022 money) and £120 rent every week (€1,400 in 2022). The consequences for prostitutes who fell out of line could be dire. "After having been there for about three months, the lights would be turned off or the water, and people would break in and smash furniture and make it impossible to earn money unless they paid more key money," Dyer said.¹³

Basement dives would be packed with eager punters seeking knock-off prices on a quick strip show. In a 1970 *Sunday Times* profile of Paul Raymond, the Maltese flair for mediocrity was given an airing by the journalist Philip Norman, who right before his interview was treated to a spot of entertainment at a Maltese-operated strip club. "The smell of feet is practically a killer fog... You stand and try to catch a glimpse through a funnel of elbows or a forest of pimply necks... Somewhere out of sight a girl was taking a maddening time to remove the brassier of a bathing suit. 'Gawd,' Raymond mourned, 'look at her great stomach'. The cellar was airless with remarks. 'Get 'em off'..."¹⁴

At the Taboo Club, the "Tropical Night" would feature a man lying on stage with just a loin cloth, simulating sex with a naked woman; a variation was "Cage of Lust", where a captured man would nab a woman on the outside and take her in; "Nazi Terror" was a sadistic performance portraying a full act of lesbianism on stage – the more obscene the performance, the greater a testing ground for police prosecuting the more scandalous acts.¹⁵

The clip-joint cons were known to many, but in the London of the Swinging Sixties they were designed as tourist traps to cheat out-of-town businessmen and tourists in the market for some lewd entertainment. Customers would approach 'clubs' that were nothing but box offices, fitted out with garish neon signs advertising the promise of lewdness, the tannoy blaring out a cantankerous echo of the mayhem taking place inside. A

bruiser at the door would take the money for the ticket, and then inform the unknowing punter that the show was actually staged elsewhere. The would-be customers would be guided from one box office to the other before finally arriving to a genuine strip-joint.¹⁶

With their short temper, the Maltese thugs manning the doors of the clubs and their basement dens were always on hand to crowd in on protesting provincials, with the threat of violence. But this violence was not without its consequences. On one November night in 1967, two men emerging from the Gigi Club on Frith Street, clearly unsatisfied with the cheap entertainment on offer, gave some prospective patrons advice not to go in. Sales manager Eric Simmons, 48, and David Cynfal Williams, an engineer, both of Hayes, were in London taking in the Soho nightlife. The two made their way to the Gigi Club – not a club in the accepted sense: admission was gained by payment for an entrance fee first, and a membership at a basement level. The two men paid an admission fee of 12 shillings 6 pence, but in the basement where the striptease show was about to take place, they were asked to take up a membership – another 5 shillings. It was the standard ruse in the Maltese clip joints.

The two men argued with the Gigi manager, hot-tempered Alfred Joseph Saliba, 28, and as they left the establishment, warned customers not to enter the club. “It’s a con,” they cried out, the two men jeering at the fuming Saliba, calling him a chicken. Saliba suddenly gave chase, catching up with the pair and knocking them to the ground with his fist. Williams’s head struck the kerb, and the man lost consciousness. Simmons too hit his head on the kerb, but suffered a brain haemorrhage, leading to his death. Saliba walked back to the club, where the doorman waited. “I’ll be at the Golden Egg,” he said, and walked to the Oxford Street restaurant, where he was later picked up by the police at 3:25am. “I only hit him with my left,” Saliba told them. “I’m sorry about this.”

Saliba pleaded not guilty to murder, with his defence successfully convincing the judge that the club manager would admit having caused manslaughter on grounds of provocation.

“You got people into your club and then asked them for more money,” said Mr Justice Maurice Lyell, passing sentence. “If you conduct your business like this, customers are likely to become dissatisfied. No doubt Mr Simmons told them they were likely to be conned if they went in. Having got Mr Simmons and Mr Williams out of your club, you ran after them. You are young and strong and you hit them with real violence. It was a brutal attack and that is all too prevalent in this part of London.”¹⁷ Saliba got off lightly: 18 months’ imprisonment.

Big Frank’s war: the Greek Street bombing

With leases assigned to name-lenders, Silver and Mifsud ensured they held quarter or half-shares in every single establishment with their own lesser partners and nominee shareholders – in total, the Syndicate’s top men controlled around 30 clubs and apartments in Soho, together with associates like Anthony ‘Terinu’ Mangion, Paul Cardona, Joseph Medina, Romeo Saliba, Frank Melito, George Caruana, Emmanuel ‘Leli Landlord’ Bartolo, Tony ‘Muntun’ Micallef, ‘Black’ Frank Spiteri, and Victor ‘Bajzu’ Micallef, amongst many others.

In various cases, Mifsud and Silver held their shares by private agreement with nominees paid £10 a week to be strawmen for the Syndicate. After the killing of Tommy Smithson in 1956, the Maltese Syndicate would enjoy two unstoppable decades during which Silver and Big Frank ruled vice in the West End, with a string of clubs and properties for striptease acts, gambling and drinking houses, and prostitutes’ flats which earned them thousands in weekly rents. Detective Chief Inspector Leonard ‘Nipper’ Read – famed persecutor of the Krays – was well aware who Mifsud was in 1966:

“Mifsud... has been a character in the West End for twenty odd years, is referred to by most of the Maltese community as ‘The Guvnor’. It is generally accepted that he controls a number of premises where he employs a fair-sized retinue and he is a wealthy man. Apparently he is looked up to when he visits Malta where it is accepted that he is the ‘King’ of the West End.”¹⁸

Many of the Syndicate's lieutenants, both within and outside the Silver-Mifsud sphere of influence, remained connected to this mafia's structure by virtue of the lucrative property deals. But there would be spectacular fall-outs with the big bosses – as revenues from the liberalisation of sexual norms in the 1960s grew, so did the opportunities for these men of vice to branch out unto their own.

A long-time partner of Mifsud was Emanuel Coleiro from Qormi – also known in business as 'John Colorado' – an associate with whom the old Soho boss would later have protracted court litigation in Malta over Sliema seafront property.

Less involved in the Syndicate's sordid affairs, property millionaire Coleiro, who emigrated to the UK in 1938, had half-shares in Mifsud's properties at 3 Derby Street, and 16 and 18 Stanhope Row, and other shares with Frank Melito on 5 Derby Street and 17A Market Mews, all housing prostitutes. Each prostitute in these properties guaranteed a weekly income of £150 for the owners – easily close to £16,000 for each property, depending on how many women could be accommodated. Coleiro was also part-owner in the Keyhole Club together with Mifsud, and even served as an investor for Maltese businessmen back home seeking the lucrative interest returns of London property.

Emanuel Bartolo, who arrived in London in 1954, had a share in the Phoenix club with Romeo Saliba – the gang leader in the 1947 Messina protection racket – at 9 Old Compton Street. Big Frank's rent collector, illiterate Nazzareno 'Jabarello' Galea, would pass on the rental incomes to Mifsud's brother Joseph. Tony Mangion was a partner with Frank Mifsud at the Mambo. And so on it went.

One of Mifsud's later rivals would be George Caruana, famously the target of hardman Smithson back in the East End. Caruana had arrived in London in September 1949, first working in a kitchen at Lyons Corner House on Piccadilly, before moving to Cardiff in 1950 to go out to sea as a kitchen porter. After two years, he returned to London, to start his life as a ponce, with a prostitute he would later marry.

With Frank Mifsud, Caruana owned the Striperama on Greek Street.¹⁹ “George had made tons of money. He had loaned it to Charles Grech *il-Likk* when he was starting out in the 1970s. He was a big man, good-looking... but he was a coward, not a fighting man. And he also probably owed Big Frank money...”²⁰

A similar rival was Tony Cauchi, also a seaman who had worked as a kitchen porter, who had arrived in the UK in August 1946, and in the 1950s opened his Valletta Café at 77 Cable Street. His was a typical criminal record for a Maltese mariner in clubland: charges of malicious wounding in 1947, causing grievous bodily harm, brothel keeping, and running illegal gaming houses. During the war, he had served in the Royal Malta Artillery with the Searchlight Regiment and the Anti-Aircraft Regiment.²¹ In 1964, Cauchi was struck a blow in the eye with a walking stick during a scuffle at his Carnival Club on Old Compton Street, where he had refused permission to some men to enter his strip club. Apparently, the aggressor – a disabled man – had acted in self-defence, but left Cauchi with the loss of sight of his left eye.

Apart from the swift violence meted out by Big Frank’s men on prostitutes or club doormen who fell out of favour with the boss, Bernie Silver could count on bribed police officers who would provide trumped-up charges against men disliked by Mifsud and Silver – cash gifts starting from a fiver for a young police constable, and nothing short of £50 for a chief inspector, Silver’s bribery system put the law on the Syndicate’s side. But the two partners were wary of weaker individuals who could easily talk to police, get nosy about property ownership, or whose club interests were taking them out of Big Frank’s sphere of control.

So when people like George Caruana started to slowly move out of this circle of influence, they became a target. Prostitute Barbara Dyer, whose husband fell foul of Big Frank, described it as a mafia: the Maltese could find you and get to you if they needed.²² The men who left the West End to take cover in Malta knew Big Frank as a man who did not forget. They whispered it among themselves that Silver’s connections to London

gangland – among them the Krays – could get anyone killed.

With monies promised to men asked to render their service to the Syndicate, providing made-up evidence or serving time for acts of revenge, Silver and Mifsud turned out to be careless with the small men they scorned. As a loose confederation of property owners held together by Mifsud's iron fist and Silver's influence with corrupt cops – as much as £50,000 was paid out annually to top Scotland Yard bosses according to one police investigation²³ – such bonds of loyalty were tested by the bosses' hubris: by the time the police caught up with the Syndicate's empire of prostitutes and pornography in the mid-1970s, almost every single member of the Syndicate under arrest gave statements against Mifsud and Silver. "It's not my country but Frank thinks it's his and he can arrange it," Victor Micallef would tell investigators over claims that Mifsud could scotch arrest warrants for the Maltese.²⁴ One of the London Maltese habitués who watched the dismantling of the Syndicate from afar remembers: "There was no real loyalty ultimately. Bar Frank Mifsud, all these men were ignorant hotheads doing Mifsud's bidding because Frank and Bernie Silver had the might. Once the police got to them, it all fell apart."²⁵

On one occasion, Leli Bartolo fell out with Big Frank in an argument over a share in the Phoenix Club, which Bartolo and Romeo Saliba wanted to themselves. Big Frank faced off Bartolo in the corner of Frith Street and Old Compton Street, slapping him around the face in a big argument in the street. Later that night, a drunken Bartolo was running his mouth in a gambling club, saying Big Frank and Bernie Silver "wanted the West End all to themselves".²⁶ His brother was called over to calm him down and have him removed from the bar.

Another Maltese club manager employed by the Syndicate, Paul Inguanez, recalled being told to move out of a second floor apartment atop the El Paradiso on Brewer Street by Big Frank himself.²⁷ "I had been at the El Paradiso for about three months when one Sunday, at about 10:30pm, Big Frank came to me and said, 'Look Paul, I've spent a lot of money on these premises and I want to do something to get it back.'" Big Frank ordered

Inguanez to move out so that he could install women on both the first floor 'office' level and the second floor. Inguanez, known as 'Paul the Priest' for having once considered the priesthood, tried giving unwise counsel to Mifsud that having prostitutes in the building would be a breach of the El Paradiso licence and attract police attention. "If I want to put women in here, you are not going to stop me," Big Frank told him.

Days later, Bernie Silver himself paid Inguanez a visit, together with his West End heavy, Jack 'Shankey' Shankerman. "There's nothing personal in this Paul... all we want to do is make a test case to improve the income of the business, because we are paying an awful lot of money in general rates to live in..." When Inguanez saw some men delivering bidets to the apartments two days later, he smashed the ceramic to pieces. Now he had really fallen out of favour with Big Frank – Inguanez was shipped out to manage another club, before being paid a visit by Mifsud, Silver and Black Frank Spiteri: "I have been told that you are saying things about us," Big Frank warned Inguanez. "If you keep doing this you will not last five minutes in the West End."

To Mifsud and Silver, keen on controlling access to Soho properties that could affect their own business interests, it was crucial that property and club ownership did not evade the Maltese circle of influence, where relations and confidants could all be traced back to the small island back home. But when George Caruana, one of the Syndicate club owners, introduced new partners to his club, he was blacklisted. Tony Cauchi, another club owner who felt slighted by Mifsud after having sold his share of the Taboo Club, was also intent on wreaking revenge. When their own associates refused to cooperate with the Syndicate, Mifsud got serious – threats, suborning of witnesses, bribery, soon enough even a murder attempt.

It began when in 1966, George Caruana brought in Cypriot businessman John Aziz on a half-share ownership of the Blue Moon Club, on Frith Street, hoping he could use the millionaire's cash to rival Big Frank. Just like the Maltese, Aziz had worked his way up to the top, investing his cash in property before

moving into Soho with the Au Refuge drinking club and later The Celebrity cabaret club. Frank Mifsud, annoyed at Caruana's affairs, hoped he could start muscling in on him.

Vincent Calleja, a porn shop peddler, remembers the feud: "Apparently Bernie Silver and Frank Mifsud, who up until that time had had a free run in the West End, got needled because they thought George was introducing outsiders to the clubs, which up until that time were run by the Maltese."²⁸

Carmelo Pace, another Maltese pimp who came to London in 1948, was approached by Big Frank for a hit on George Caruana. "Frank saw that I did not want any trouble with George... Frank said, 'We will have to get rid of that George'."²⁹

Mifsud then tried using Ronald 'Scotty' Attard, a short-tempered, small-time thief and habitu  of the Syndicate, by setting him up as a doorman of the Casbah, just two doors up from the Blue Moon. Big Frank hoped Attard's short fuse would naturally lead to a confrontation with Caruana: the two men had already had a small confrontation inside a Frith Street betting shop, when Caruana, testing the waters of the Maltese rift, entered the shop, saw Attard and muttered threateningly at him that he was about "to get life imprisonment over someone."³⁰

In the oft-used tactic employed by Big Frank, the boss would egg on his Maltese subordinates to go wild on his enemies, reassuring them he would get them off the hook with the law. "Don't worry, we've got friends in the Home Office," Mifsud told Attard, inviting him to have a go at Caruana. Bernie Silver egged on Attard to kill Caruana, when in early 1968 he stopped inside the Casbah to speak to him. "Scotty, do him in," he said, nodding in the direction of the Blue Moon club. "The other chap only got eighteen months and we will back you up," referring to Alfred Saliba's scuffle that ended in involuntary murder.

Scotty Attard was scared, fearing he could end up beaten up or even killed if he did not do Mifsud's and Silver's bidding. He took two weeks' leave from the Casbah.

And soon enough, Mifsud put it out on the street that he had stolen  200 in takings. Attard beat a retreat from the business entirely, getting out of the Syndicate's way and the West End.

Bombs and a hit on Big Frank

Big Frank's ways created enemies. Despite having countless men to do his bidding for the kind of cash he had on offer, the enmity with Caruana and other associates of his would breed a culture of vengeance that was to reach fever pitch inside Soho.

The first attack came on 5 November, 1966: an explosion at the Gigi Club on 62, Frith Street, in the early hours at 4am, by a bomb left in a plastic bag by the doorway, of sufficient violence that could have killed anyone in the vicinity of the explosion. Weeks later on 25 November at 2:35am, a second one at the Keyhole Club, on 55, Old Compton Street – both properties owned by Big Frank Mifsud and Bernie Silver. Mifsud dismissed the Gigi incident as the work of a lunatic. But after the Keyhole explosion, he offered a reward of £500 to the West End fraternity for information that could lead to the culprits, raising it to £1,000, with no success. Gang warfare this was, but generally even Soho's gangsters were aware that such actions could not touch innocent passers-by or other criminal gangs. "Firebombs like these were an overt act of putting the frighteners on each other: warning shots," Howard Raymond recalls. "The Maltese fought amongst themselves. It never crossed over. For us, it wasn't a problem. It wasn't Chicago."

But the worst attack would happen just three months later.

It was 1am on Greek Street on Thursday, 2 February, 1967. TheAmericano Club, a three-storey gambling house and striptease club on Greek Street, was in full swing – a typical scene where gamblers and punters congregated in a gaming room set on the top floor above a porn bookstore, run by Maltese bouncers and croupiers. Suddenly, it was mayhem: flames roared up a funnel-like stairway, engulfing the entire house. The strong smell of petrol filled the air. Strippers and their male audience rushed out. Greek Street was filled with shouting and screaming, but the gamblers, mostly Cypriots and Maltese, were trapped in the rooms above. One man jumped 40 feet from a window, rolling into the path of a passing car.³¹ Another two leapt from second-floor windows, while others – Joseph Farrugia, Victor Zampa, and John Fenech – went out through the fire exit and scrambled

onto adjoining buildings. Leli Vella smashed a window to get out and slide down the drainpipes to the ground. Alfred Fenech, a doorman from the Phoenix Club, saw Joseph Medina smashing the windows with a chair to get out. It was a scene to behold as over 30 firemen fought the blaze. Two men were snatched from the flames with the help of a 100-foot turntable ladder after the fire escape door would not open.³²

One of these was 29-year-old croupier Valletta man Ray Renda, who had just started work there just two weeks earlier. He suffered injuries to his face and hands. 24-year-old kitchen hand John Fenech suffered serious 30% burns, flesh burns of the face and head, both hands, and both legs. He was rushed over to Charing Cross Hospital. In all, sixteen people were taken to hospital suffering superficial burns injuries, five taken to Middlesex Hospital to be treated for shock.³³ Scotland Yard lifted evidence from site, finding a crude plastic container thought to have been filled with petrol.

The Greek Street bombing took front-page prominence on *The Daily Mirror* – uncannily side by side with a similar incident happening in Valletta, where the R.A.F's recruiting headquarters had been set on fire with lighted bundles of newspapers, as Malta's relations with the UK grew uneasy due to the run-down of the British defence services stationed in Malta.

Big Frank put out a reward for £3,000 for information leading to the culprits behind the *Americano*. Some men in the Syndicate years later would claim Mifsud simply wanted to pin the Greek Street bombing on Tony Cauchi.³⁴ But, it was Tony 'Derek' Galea, a 27-year-old doorman at Cauchi's Carnival Club, who came forward to tell Mifsud all.

Like many of his generation, Galea had come to the UK in the early 1960s to run away from the law and the restrictions of small-island life, taking up a job in an East End café. He had spent almost three years in Malta in jail between 1960 and 1962 for various charges of aggravated theft and assault. He later moved to the Syndicate's clubs, like the *Taboo*, and in 1965 started working for Tony Cauchi as the doorman of the Carnival Club on Old Compton Street. It was at this time that Big Frank

and Bernie Silver had turned against Cauchi. "They were always arguing with Cauchi. I don't know what about, but Tony said it went back a long time," Galea told police.³⁵

Mifsud himself was forthcoming enough with the police on the feud with Cauchi, believing he had apparently goaded his rival after a business deal gone wrong: "Cauchi hates me because of business... the trouble started when he had a club called the Carnival in Greene's Court. This club closed down and I took another over, which was opposite, which we also called the Carnival. This annoyed Cauchi. Six months ago he came in with me and three others as partners of the Taboo Club – eventually he sold his share and he was under the mistaken impression that I had done something underhanded. He blames me that he was not the sole owner."³⁶

Galea, easily the weaker party of the Americano conspiracy, admitted to Mifsud that he had actually been present when Cauchi was making the explosive at his house, and took him to the bridge by the Euston station railway, where he pinpointed a piece of bomb-fuse wire he had discarded. Galea retrieved the fuse, and gave it to Mifsud.

Galea even claimed with Mifsud that Cauchi was planning to have him shot for £3,000, and that he would even consider planting a bomb under his car. "Derek told me Cauchi wants to destroy me and that he had thrown the bombs so that I would blame some well-known people in the West End," Big Frank told investigators – a reference to the Krays or the Nash brothers, suggesting Cauchi hoped the Syndicate would suspect some extortion racket and fall foul of these crime organisations. The police agreed that Cauchi appeared to have sufficient motive, and advised Mifsud to make himself scarce. Big Frank fled to Ireland, where he lived with wife Margaret in Dublin.

Mifsud suggested to police that they use Galea to entrap Cauchi when the next bomb was planted, but the objections to this were obvious due to the danger of such a plan. Wanting to test the quality of information Galea would give them, the police arrested him.

Galea protested, at first claiming he did not even know

Mifsud; later as his confidence grew, he admitted to having been present in the storeroom at Cauchi's home where they prepared the bomb used at both the Keyhole Club and the Americano on Greek Street. He said Cauchi would soon be on his way back to Malta to bring back more explosives. He further admitted having cleared out all the incriminating evidence, and being present when a piece of fuse was thrown off the bridge in Hampstead Road onto the Euston railway line below. To give credence to his story, he took Frank Mifsud himself to recover it, and Mifsud handed the fuse to the police.

Galea was questioned on 17 February at 10pm.³⁷ DCI Nipper Read, present for the interrogation, made a note of how terrified Galea was of Cauchi.

Galea first claimed the real perpetrators of the bombs were two heavies, one Scottish – James Kemp – another from Liverpool – Michael Power – whom Cauchi would have paid £500. But Read was unconvinced, insisting with prosecutors that it was inconceivable for someone like Cauchi to employ 'outsiders' to the Maltese fraternity for an operation of this sort: "Amongst the touts in this locality are many who are good informants to officers at this station, and such knowledge would quickly percolate to those officers."

Detective Superintendent Arthur Butler instantly produced a length of safety fuse. "Didn't you tell Frank where to find this?"

Galea replied: "Listen, guv'nor. This thing is dead or alive innit? You know what I mean. I don't want to get killed. This man is mad, mad... and you don't know what he can do," he said. He was referring to Cauchi. "Cauchi, that man is raving mad. If he knew I come here I be dead tomorrow. You know that, don't you? He'd kill me as soon as... look at me guv'nor, I promise you... If anybody gets to know I come here, I'm dead. You know that don't you?"

Then Galea admitted having been by Cauchi's side when he made the bomb. "I was there when he mixed the stuff and made the bomb. It was dynamite... it was brown stuff and he made it up... It was terrible this stuff, it gave me a headache. He taped it all together."

Frank Mifsud returned from his Dublin hideout the same day Galea was arrested, and presented himself at West End Central together with Bernie Silver, with Galea speaking even more freely with Mifsud near him. But by this time, he had said enough to satisfy the investigators that he was far more deeply involved than he had suggested.

As Mifsud entered the interrogation room, Galea protested: "Frank, what you do this to me for? I got friends, you know... It's a bad thing you do to me Frank, what I want to come in a place like this for? You know my position, don't you? I can't go to court. I don't care if I go away for 30 years. I never stand up in court and say anything against these people. You know that. I can't give no evidence, Frank."

Mifsud calmed Galea down. Galea now volunteered even more information about Cauchi having planned to bomb the Taboo club. "Three days before I went along with Frank, Cauchi was scared and he threw it all away after the fire."

He also said Cauchi had threatened him the day before. "Last night he pulled a knife and threatened me and my woman. She's scared of him as well. He said, 'if you say anything, I burn you up. I burn up the mattress and everything and turn on the gas and it look like all right'."

"He said he wants to plant a load in Big Frank's van," Cauchi told police, and that he had planned to leave a signal on the car for Mifsud to know when the bomb was planted. "I told Frank 'if he's going to do it, I put a cross on the door' so Big Frank know."

Police retrieved crucial evidence found in Cauchi's home of bomb-making ingredients that matched the debris from the Americano bombing. But in one startling development, police investigators were suddenly regaled with an eyeball witness. It was none other than one of the witnesses previously questioned by the police, who had first vowed having seen nothing suspicious outside the Americano. Hot-dog seller Harold Dennison Stocker had been explicit in his first statement to police when he said he saw no-one enter or leave the premises at 27, Greek Street. Suddenly, he had had a change of heart. On 8 March 1967, Stocker insisted that just prior to the fire starting, he saw Tony Galea

running out of the club, allegedly warning him: "Don't forget you didn't see me on the night of the fire, did you?"

Stocker accounted for this apparent paradox by saying that he did not realise that Galea was one of the persons charged, and when he did so, he came forward with fresh evidence. During the committal proceedings, his version of events – incredulous as they were – were seriously challenged by Galea's defence counsel, suspecting Stocker had been enticed with some kind of reward to change his version of events: indeed, Mifsud had been present at West End Central when Stocker made his second statement.

On 13 March 1967, Galea and Cauchi were committed for trial at the Central Criminal Court. A month later, yet another development: Bernard Silver informed police that Cauchi's brother Emanuel, and another man, as it happens his own associate Jack Shankerman, were making arrangements to pick up some explosive materials.³⁸ A police stakeout on the two saw them making their way on 18 April to HM Prison Brixton, where they visited Tony Cauchi. When police took in 'Shankey', he alleged that Cauchi had told him a bomb had been hidden near the handbrake panel of his car. Nipper Read appeared to discount Shankerman's evidence, suggesting Silver was actually using his own man to use subterfuge on Cauchi. "Shankey is a well-known and notorious West End character," Read wrote in his memorandum on the investigation. "He has been a friend and associate of Silver's for many years. This tends to place the whole of his evidence in question but there can be no doubt of the result of the information he supplied."

Cauchi's car had already been seized by police back in February, and released on 29 March – but the police did not bother to carry out a full inspection of the car. When two days after questioning Shankerman, police retrieved the car from a mechanic Cauchi had entrusted it to, they found a cavity at the back of the parcel tray's panelling, containing a newspaper parcel and a roll of cellotape. Inside the parcel were two lengths of fuse, each of which had 'live' detonators partly crimped onto the ends, and a piece of dark brown substance. Had Cauchi

been careless, or was this an overt act of incrimination by the Syndicate?

Back at Woolwich Arsenal, forensics revealed the fuses were identical to those found at Cauchi's address and the Keyhole explosion; the explosive – a mixture of nitroglycerine, nitrocellulose, T.N.T, and another substance of foreign nature – were all similar to the residue found amongst the debris of the Gigi and Keyhole explosions. The description of the substances and their effects were identical to Galea's statements to the police.

Tony Cauchi, 47, was charged in March 1967 with having caused the fires at the Americano, the firebombing of the Gigi Club on Frith Street in 1966 (the bombing took place at 4:30am when the club was closed and nobody was inside) and the Keyhole Club on Old Compton Street.³⁹ The charge sheet's details included the claim that they had conspired "with others to cause these offences because of their enmity towards the owners of the premises, a rival Maltese faction."⁴⁰

Big Frank returned from his Dublin hideout to give evidence against Cauchi, telling the court he feared for his life. Both men were found guilty in a retrial in November 1967: Cauchi got five years, guilty of having explosives in his possession, conspiracy to cause malicious damage to property, and placing an explosive substance.⁴¹ The jury were unable to agree on a charge against Galea of causing malicious damage at the club, as well as on a charge against both men of placing another petrol bomb at another Soho club. Galea got two years for placing the explosive at the Americano.

Stocker, the hot-dog seller who had changed his version of events by saying he saw Galea running out of the club, gave evidence at both trials and stuck by his story. The night of Galea's and Cauchi's imprisonment, Big Frank held a party at the Soho Prince club on Frith Street.

Big Frank tries to get to Renda

Matters went far worse for Ray Renda, the croupier who was seemingly loyal to Tony Cauchi and had been working inside the Americano when it was fire-bombed.⁴²

Months after Cauchi had been sentenced, Renda – now working at the Carnival Club – went off to Katie's Club for a drink. As he entered, he spotted Romeo Saliba – Cauchi's business partner – drinking with Big Frank, Victor 'Bajžu' Micallef, Tony 'Muntun' Micallef, Bernie Silver, and a man he recognised as a police inspector.

Saliba appeared anxious upon seeing Renda, attempted to make small talk with him and made his excuses to leave. Big Frank sent *Bajžu* over with a drink but Renda refused. "Don't be silly. Frank has nothing against you. He just wants to talk business," *Bajžu* said.

Then Big Frank came over, proposing to Renda that he convince Tony Cauchi to sell the Carnival Club to him for £5,000 (€100,000 in present-day value). Renda refused: "If I tell Cauchi this he would try to get out of prison to have a go at me."

"You don't have to mention my name," Big Frank replied. "Just say some Chinese fellow was going to do the business." When Renda asked about Cauchi's erstwhile partner, Romeo Saliba, it turned out that he was already game.

Renda never obliged. Weeks later, he told *Bajžu* he would do nobody's bidding, and that he was busy setting up his own gambling house, buying Saliba's lease of a Frith Street café for £700, with a loan from Charlie 'Ċannis' Bugeja.

The Syndicate was not pleased. Mifsud's men let Renda know they wanted the Frith Street property's overhead flats for prostitution, so they put the word out not to have anyone gamble at Renda's rooms. The message worked, and Renda was run to the ground. When he next attempted a less inconspicuous business avenue by making a book on the night horse races, a raid by HM Revenue and Customs officers followed.

Exasperated, Renda consented to a sit-down with Big Frank at a Brixton pub, where Mifsud once again made him a proposition. "Look Ray, you've never trusted me or done as I have told you to do. I've made *Bajžu* a rich man because he does what I tell him... We're all Maltese and we should be friends and help each other... don't worry about nothing, it will be all fixed up and your share will be there when you get back."

Big Frank told Renda to sell his lease back to Charlie Bugeja, promising him a partnership at the Casbah on Frith Street, which he wanted turned into a gambling club. Renda did as he was told, and went back to Malta for a holiday.

In July 1970 the Casbah was reopened in Renda's absence – as a strip club, not a gambling club. Renda felt double-crossed. Angry at Big Frank, Renda put the word out that he would go to the Home Office – but not to Scotland Yard, where the Syndicate held a tight arm around some friendly officers – to report them for “tax fiddles”, and how much they charged for the flats and their other business dealings.

Renda's careless talk earned him a visit from none other than hard man Albert Dimes, the one-time enforcer to Billy Hill, notorious for taking on London boss Jack Spot in the Frith Street corner fight of 1955 – he cut his face, eyes and cheeks, marking the beginning of the end for Spot's dominance in the West End.

Dimes was telegraphic with Renda, warning him he would have “his legs cut off” for mouthing off. Renda was speechless. He beat a hasty retreat from West End life and took up a job as a salesman at Kitchen Queen on Broadwick Street.

Renda's troubles had not yet come to an end. Two weeks later, he and his wife were assaulted outside a Soho pub at 12:30am. As they emerged from the pub with their two friends, two men waiting outside came up to Renda, assaulted his wife, and stabbed him in the back.

After spending three days at Middlesex Hospital, Albert Dimes relayed a new message to Renda – don't give evidence about the fight. This time, Renda decided to hold back.

Still, the threats did not stop there. Renda was back at work at Kitchen Queen when someone called him – this time a voice that was either Maltese or Italian. “I received a telephone call which said that if I gave evidence in court I wouldn't see my kids again, as they knew which school they went to,” he later told Wickstead.

Renda lost his temper, ran out on Broadwick Street and walked straight to Frith Street to confront Dimes himself. “If anything happens to my kids I'm going to do you and the people

who I think are telling you to do these things,” Renda shouted at Dimes, who opted to calm him down and have a little chat with him at a nearby café.

Renda moved back to Malta with his family. Dimes died soon after in 1972, at 57.

Years later in 1974, when Albert Wickstead was reopening cold cases against the Maltese Syndicate, Renda would be one of the witnesses to throw new light on the Americano firebombing.

“I didn’t tell the police about the threats I had received from Dimes,” he told Wickstead. “Because I was afraid of what would happen to me.”

Partial list of Syndicate clubs from 1960s onwards

99 Club – St Ann’s Court; Americano – 27, Greek Street; Apple Club – Wardour Mews; Blue City; Blue Moon Club – Frith Street; Carnival Club – Old Compton Street; Casbah – Frith Street; El Paradiso Club – Brewer Street; Folies Bergere – Greens Court; Geisha Theatre Club – Old Compton Street; Gigi Club – 62, Frith Street; Flamingo – Berwick Street; Hawaii – Great Windmill Street; Katies Club – Old Compton Street; Keyhole Club – 55 Old Compton Street; Luigi Club – Greek Street; Mambo Club – Greek Street; Naked City (George Caruana) – Frith Street; Phoenix – 9, Old Compton Street; Pigalle; Red Mill – Macclesfield Street; Rio Grande Club – Berwick Street; Scheherazade Club – Tisbury Lane; Taboo Club – Dean Street; White Monkey Club – 10, Gerrard Street

-
1. “4-Year Sentence ‘Not Severe’, Appeal Dismissed,” *The Guardian*, June 21, 1960
 2. Thomas, Donald, *Villains’ Paradise, A History of Britain’s Underworld* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2006), 285-286
 3. Yates, Nigel, *Love Now, Pay Later? Sex and religion in the fifties and sixties* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2010), 115
 4. Kelland, Gilbert, *Crime in London* (London: Bodley Head, 1986), 79
 5. Interview with author, 23 August 2022

6. Willetts, Paul, *The Look Of Love* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2013), 180
7. Interview with author, 25 July 2022
8. Morton, James, *Gangland Soho* (London: Piatkus Books, 2008), 198
9. John Gaul was a West End property millionaire who himself had faced vice charges as a landlord to prostitutes' business flats. In 1976, his ex-wife Barbara was brutally shot in the car park of the Black Lion Pub in Patcham, near Brighton. Police arrested two Eastender brothers, Roy and Keith Edgeler, who were allegedly brought into the plot via a middleman, Charles Kray, brother to the notorious twins. The Edgelers confessed to the shooting, but defiantly refused to name the man who had hired them for the hit. Gaul was questioned, but released for lack of evidence, and three days after flew to Italy and then Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. In 1978, Gaul wrote an eight-page letter to the British Sunday Times explaining why he would not return to England to face further questions. He claimed that the police had a vendetta against him. In April 1978, Gaul came to Malta where his luxury yacht Lotus Eater was moored. In 1981, the Maltese courts turned down a British request to extradite Gaul.
10. Kelland, *ibid.* 111
11. Interview with author, 23 August 2022
12. BSO, Barbara Sylvia Dyer (10/9/1929) statement of witness September 14, 1973
13. *Ibid.*
14. Willetts, *ibid.*, 226
15. "Police move in on strip-club showdown," *Post-Mercury Series*, June 19, 1970
16. Willetts, *ibid.* 210
17. "Man Died After Strip Club Argument: Manager Jailed," *Westminster & Pimlico News*, March 1, 1968
18. NA, MEPO 2/11087, Explosion at Keyhole Club, 55 Old Compton Street, W1 on 26 November 1966: subsequent arrest and conviction of Tony GALEA and CAUCHI, Leonard Read, Report to Detective Superintendent
19. "Strippers And Audience Face Arrest," *Daily Telegraph*, November 8, 1963
20. Club owner, interview with author, 23 August 2022
21. NA, MEPO 2/11087, *ibid.*, Maltese Records Office MR/RMA/4650
22. BSO, Barbara Sylvia Dyer, statement of witness, September 14, 1973
23. "Police 'took huge bribes,'" *The Guardian*, March 1, 1977
24. BSO, Victor Micallef, statement of witness, December 30, 1983
25. As told to author by former Soho club owner with ties to Syndicate, September 2020
26. BSO, Ray Aurelio Renda, statement of witness
27. BSO, Paul Inguanez, statement of witness, March 6, 1974
28. BSO, Vincent Calleja, statement of witness, January 28, 1974
29. BSO, Carmel Pace, statement of witness, January 7, 1974
30. BSO, Ronald Charles Attard, statement of witness, October 1, 1973
31. "Strippers And Gamblers Flee Soho Club Fire Horror," *Evening Post*, February 3, 1967
32. "10 hurt as fire sweeps Soho club," *Daily Mirror*, February 3, 1967
33. "CID Probe Club Fire In Soho," *The Coventry Evening Telegraph*, February 3, 1967
34. BSO, Larry Agius, statement of witness, February 2, 1974
35. BSO, Anthony Galea, statement of witness, March 1, 1974
36. NA, MEPO 2/11087, *ibid.*, Frank Saviour Mifsud, statement, February 24, 1967
37. NA, MEPO 2/11087, *ibid.*
38. NA, MEPO 2/11087, *ibid.*, Memorandum, Leonard Read
39. "Strip Boss Lives In Fear," *Daily Mirror*, March 11, 1967
40. NA, MEPO 2/11087, *ibid.*
41. "Soho Bomb Raids: 2 Jailed," *Daily Mirror*, November 7, 1967
42. BSO, Ray Aurelio Renda, statement of witness

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MALTESE FAVOUR THAT KILLED THE KRAYS

“They could scarcely read, write or count, and they were rotten shots, yet in the 1960s Ronnie and Reggie Kray became Britain’s most notorious gang bosses for centuries: feared and hated, respected and despised, adored and ridiculed.”¹

THE Maltese cautiously watched the ebb and flow of Soho’s overlords throughout the 1960s, not as participants in gang warfare, but as tenants of these higher powers that took control of London’s criminal boroughs. The Syndicate’s attentions were occupied entirely by their own rapacious acquisition of Soho properties.

But it was impossible to ignore the long shadow cast by English gangsters over life in the West End. The Krays had been on the ascendant well before the 1960s. Early on in 1955 they provided protection for Jack Spot against Italian rivals at the Epsom races. But this was no partnership, just their introduction to gangland. Spot would soon meet his demise at Billy Hill’s hands – first in the infamous ‘Frith Street corner sight’ with hard man Albert Dimes; later, in an assault on him and his wife by Hill’s enforcer ‘Mad’ Frankie Fraser, hastening the end of his tenuous hold on the West End. Even Billy Hill, now the undisputed king of London underworld, had the foresight to plan his gradual retirement in Tangiers, as younger gangs like the Krays and the Richardsons, started taking their place in the world of London crime.

By the middle of the 1960s, the Krays’ protection racket had spread from slumlord Peter Rachman’s interests (Rachman died of a heart attack in 1962) to Bernie Silver’s West End properties.

But it would be a bizarre enterprise for the Maltese Syndicate

– a favour requested by Bernie Silver and Frank Mifsud – that gifted the indefatigable Detective Chief Superintendent Leonard ‘Nipper’ Read, a crucial window in which to pin down the Krays and their weakest elements: an assassination attempt on a Syndicate rival – George Caruana – that would provide Read the opportunity to mount a case to eventually bring the weight of the law upon the Krays, smashing the entire enterprise to pieces.

1955: The Krays square up with the Maltese

Where the Maltese Syndicate fitted in the division of dirty spoils from the vice industry of the 1960s, mattered little to the lords of crime. The “swarthy ponces” were disliked by the Krays, and rated lowly in the scale of villainy. Yet when they came to the West End they would profit too from vice, where cash from Soho’s sex merchants would also pass on to the Kray’s ‘firm’.²

Now etched in Kray legend is the seminal encounter where an unidentified gang of Maltese mobsters from Shadwell attempted to encroach onto the twins’ first club, at a time when fledgling Maltese gangs had been moving into the protection business.³ The skirmish with the Maltese came at the Regal billiard hall off the Mile End Road in 1955, where the 22-year-olds had been flexing their muscles and establishing their name. “The Regal was the start of it all,” older brother Charles Kray recalled in his memoirs. “What finished the violence at the Regal once and for all was what happened to a Maltese gang, also from the East End. They made a big mistake one night when they decided to call by for their protection money. It was just after the billiard hall had reopened. Now it’s a joke to think of anyone mad enough to try and extort money from Ron and Reg, but their reputation at that stage was slight.”⁴

Charles Kray recalled a number of Maltese gangs around the Mile End area in the 1950s, many of them “well-established and confident” enough to call on Ron and Reg. The Regal had been a trouble spot, attracting a lot of fights which the club’s owner was unable to handle. The Krays came along in 1954. “We smashed a few heads together and the fighting stopped,” Ron Kray recalled in his memoirs. “We turned it into a really nice place, with

fourteen tables and a bar... We were just about the only fellers who could deal with all the trouble at [the] club. It was as simple as that. It wasn't easy, and it was at the Regal that we came face to face with the protection racket for the first time."

As the story goes, Ron Kray was serving behind the bar one afternoon when around five men walked in. Casually, they strolled around, checking out the billiard tables and the cue sticks. One of them came up to the bar, asked Ron if he was running the club, wanting to talk business. "I asked him what he wanted. He said in future he'd be coming in every week to collect protection money. If we didn't pay it, he said, the club could have a bit of trouble. What sort of trouble? Oh, you know, a few smashed windows, maybe a petrol bomb, a fire, a few of the cloths on the tables ripped, a big fight. That sort of thing."

From thereon came into being one of the most enduring images of the Krays' precocious taste for violence. "Without hesitation, he picked up a long sword that he kept behind the bar," Reg Kray recalled, "and chased the Maltese out of the billiard hall to their waiting car. He proceeded to hack away at the car with the sword, smashing the windows, too, before they sped off to safety."

Sword, cutlass, or katana – whichever literary and filmic variation of the threatening instrument was used – Ron threw the gangleader across one of the billiard tables, and first stuck a bayonet straight through his hand. "Pinned him to the table. It was him that needed protection then. There was now a right skirmish going on in the club, so I grabbed a Japanese sword we kept hung on the wall, took it down, and chased the rest of the Maltese bastards out of the club. They all jumped into a Ford car, but they couldn't get it started. So I started to smash it up with the sword. I smashed up the roof and the bonnet and the windscreen. In the end they were lucky: they managed to get the motor started and drive away. They were lucky because if they hadn't, I would have smashed them up as well."

After that, the Krays never had any more trouble with protection gangs. "We were like soldiers of the streets, defending our territory against the enemy. And that's all we ever did when

it came to violence, we only ever fought with our own kind.”

Now an essential part of the Kray folklore, the representation of the Maltese skirmish in film only elicits mediocre renditions of their stuttering Cockney brogue. But as far as gangsters go, it was an event that coincided with the Syndicate’s growing influence in vice: the murder of East End villain Tommy Smithson, admired by the Krays as part of a culture of fighting men in the 1950s, was crucial in setting the Maltese apart. But that murder would only be unravelled 20 years later, at the tail-end of a Scotland Yard investigation to rout out corruption at the heart of its Obscene Publications Squad.

Death by cyanide, crossbow, and gelignite: the George Caruana plot

Now at the apex of their power, by the middle of the 1960s the Krays were taking money off a number of Soho clubs run by Bernie Silver and Frank Mifsud.⁵ Every week, Silver paid £60 in protection money, collected on Mondays by old Joe Schaeffer, an older associate of the twins.⁶ Even if the Maltese were paying higher amounts, it was more than a fair deal for an enterprise that made far higher revenues than that on a weekly basis. “A man called Joe Schaeffer worked for Bernie Silver in and around his clubs. He would carry the weekly protection money from Silver to the twins. The amount was about £60 per week,” Kray gang member Albert Donoghue told Bert Wickstead when the detective was building his case against the Maltese Syndicate in 1973.⁷

Another Kray member tasked with the collections from the Maltese was Willie Malone, a one-time docker and bestman to George Cornell, the gangster murdered by Ronnie Kray in Whitechapel’s Blind Beggar pub in 1966.⁸

But what sharpened the Krays’ interests in Soho was an offer from the American mafia to have the twins provide protection for their casino interests in London. This calling-card was suddenly viewed as a springboard for the Krays to take a full share in Silver’s clubs – forcefully, naturally enough. In a meeting set up by Joey Kaufman⁹, the Krays were brought into the plans for the

mafia's gambling junkets from California and New York to the casinos in the West End. It was big money. But when a fortuitous invitation to the twins arrived from Bernie Silver to solve a problem for the Maltese Syndicate, the Jewish mobster had no idea he was about to create a Golem that would only make his problems bigger. "Silver did not know that, the way they were planning to solve it, he would have a far bigger problem on his hands," Donoghue recalled.¹⁰

It was all to do with George Caruana himself, the Maltese club owner severed from the Syndicate. In March 1968, Silver requested a sit-down with Ronnie Kray. The twins took Donoghue and gang member 'Little' Thomas Cowley with them to the Gallipoli, a Turkish restaurant off Liverpool Street. "We went in and found a couple of guys waiting: no less than Bernie Silver and his Maltese partner, Big Frankie Mifsud. Silver was Jewish, but he was running Soho in league with a lot of Malts. Then it dawned on us that Bernie Silver could not stand Ronnie. He wouldn't talk to him. He wouldn't even sit with him. Reggie and Bernie sat on the table, but Ronnie had to slum it with the rest of us. No wonder Ronnie wanted to double-cross him," Donoghue recalled.¹¹

The conversation lasted 30 minutes. Silver and Mifsud believed Caruana was upsetting their business and wanted him seen to. "Caruana was supposed to be severely dealt with, tuned up, but the twins decided to have him put down altogether. This would tie up Silver as he was in the conspiracy," Donoghue said. "When I say Caruana was to be 'tuned up', I mean he was to be seriously injured, which was what Silver insisted on. He was to be frightened out of the West End because he was interfering with Silver's business."¹²

But this favour to Silver was the Krays' opportunity to crowbar their way into obtaining a large equity in a Soho club. At the table of the conspiracy, a plot was hatched to send a message to George Caruana. Silver wanted Caruana to be taught a lesson – not so the Krays. "He didn't want Caruana dead, but the twins had decided that the Malt would be killed anyway. Then, when he turned up dead, they could steam into Silver, blackmail him

and finally take over his clubs,” Donoghue said.

The Krays had already enrolled the help of the enigmatic Alan Bruce Cooper, a fixer who had assisted the twins in a previous botched hit job on gangster Jim Evans. They would give Cooper the Caruana job, a dramatic assassination, to impress the twins’ American mafia connections.¹³

Cooper, 36, had been introduced to the twins as a banker who could provide forged registration certificates for a batch of \$70,000 in stolen Canadian government bonds – a wealthy, Jewish bon vivant, his role in the Krays’ life abounds with mystery, allegedly serving as a conduit to the American mafia, and assisting the Krays with personal banking services, as well as two assassination attempts. “Cooper [was] a rum little Jewish Anglo-American who’d first been fed into them to help get rid of stolen Canadian government bonds that had come their way. ‘ABC’ was flash – he had a big house in Holland Park and a pair of Rolls-Royces – but ridiculous. He had a drooped moustache, scarcely any hair, though he was only in his thirties, and a stutter... Cooper spun a fantastical one: he was an international hitman running a team of professional assassins,” Donoghue wrote of the hit on Caruana and the Krays’ maniacal, homicidal spree that would turn out to be their undoing.¹⁴

By other accounts, Cooper was also said to be a spy, with a history of arms smuggling, and connections to European forgers. He had impressed the Krays with his wealth and his ability to provide them with guns – even provided them with photostats of Scotland Yard reports. Ronnie Kray – whose confidence Cooper had managed to win over – decided to put ‘ABC’ to the test. Murder was the “ultimate guarantee and test of criminal loyalty.”¹⁵

The first victim had been Jim Evans, a small-time London villain who months earlier had started an underworld vendetta. He had fired off a sawn-off shotgun into the groin of his wife’s lover, George Foreman – none other than the brother of respected London gangster Fred Foreman. Foreman had been enlisted by the Krays to get rid of ‘Mad’ Frank Mitchell and dispose of the body of Jack ‘The Hat’ McVitie. Murdering Evans would repay

Foreman the favour.

Evans had been scheduled to appear as a witness at the Old Bailey. So Cooper suggested he would find a man to kill Evans inside the criminal court, boldly enough, using a briefcase that could be triggered to spring out a hypodermic syringe containing cyanide, and be thrust into Evans's leg, provoking a heart attack within minutes.¹⁶ The weapon seemed suited for a crowded situation in which the assassin could bump into Evans, such as the courts' grand stairway.

Cooper's man for the job was an electrical engineer by the name of Eugene Paul Elvey – an unlikely murderer who ended up bungling up the job. “Luckily for Evans, the steps were so crowded they couldn't get the briefcase anywhere near him. That was Cooper's excuse for failing to do him, but it struck me as rubbish,” Donoghue recalled. “I don't think Cooper or his man seriously tried to do Evans. At the time I doubted if they'd even gone to the Old Bailey. Either way, Cooper had his excuse for calling off the attempt, and the gullible twins believed him.”

Donoghue believed Cooper was an entrapment merchant who had already failed to deliver on his promise to kill Evans. But their faith in Cooper was unshakeable. And the plan to kill George Caruana would turn out to have an even more sinister twist than the cyanide-briefcase plot.

“So we're going to test Cooper's man on Caruana. If he does it all right, we'll give him a grand, and then there'll be other jobs for him later,” Ronnie Kray told Donoghue. Normal things like a knife or gun could not be used, Kray later told Cooper, suggesting he attempt the cyanide-briefcase hit on Caruana. But Cooper appealed to Ronnie Kray's love of spectacle, and promised him fireworks: he would wire up Caruana's car and blow him to pieces.

Only that, in due course, Bernie Silver had realised what the Krays were up to and he scrambled to abort the mission. “Silver changed his mind about involving them over Caruana and tried to call them off, but the twins wouldn't have that. They said, in effect, ‘No, we're going through with it’. This way they would bring Silver into line,” Donoghue said.¹⁷

The plan was to blow up Caruana right outside the Islet Town casino in Curzon Street in Mayfair. But that would have spelt trouble for Silver and Mifsud, because the casino was owned by Big Joe Wilkins, another Soho clubland proprietor whom the Krays wanted in line. The Syndicate was suddenly rendered powerless, understanding that it had unleashed the Krays' manic violence on the West End. Yet Silver was in no position to call the hit off. "All he could do was offer them money. But the twins weren't interested in money. No, they wanted him and his entire business, which was of a kind they had never got into before. They wouldn't have bothered to run it themselves. They would have found two or three faces in that game already – Greeks or Maltese – then put them to work in Silver's places, always trying to ensure most of the take came back to the Firm. That was the grand scheme..." Donoghue said.¹⁸

Cooper was planning to blow up Caruana's bright red Mini with six sticks of gelignite – enough to take out Curzon Street entirely. The man tasked with the bomb was, once again, Elvey, him of the failed briefcase plot. Cooper and Elvey had discussed various methods by which the Kray wanted the Caruana job done: Elvey suggested a crossbow, Cooper a harpoon gun. Then he just handed him £100 to get cracking on the job.¹⁹

Sometime in April 1968, Elvey was picked up by Cooper and a Kray driver outside the Dominion Theatre at Tottenham Court Road, to show him Caruana's Mini. Inside their own car was the crossbow with which Elvey had intended killing Caruana. A little further up on Greek Street, Cowley pointed out the "very heavy-set, tall, dark man, with a swarthy complexion" – Caruana himself – standing at the doorway of a club. The killers parked further up the block, and walked back to see the Mini, even walking past Caruana himself.²⁰

"He brought this paper out in the car with him," Elvey told investigators years later. "Later he told me, by referring to the paper, that George had a red mini, number 238-FGO. He said George's address was Powis Street, Westbourne Park Road and he left the car parked outside this address during the week. George had a girlfriend who lived at Baldwin Crescent, Camberwell, and

his car was parked outside that address at weekends. Alan told me the Krays had given him all this information and he gave me the piece of paper and told me to copy it down, which I did... We drove down to Soho and parked in Greek Street, and we then walked into Frith Street. Alan parked his car, purely by luck, right opposite to George's mini and we checked the number. When we got to Frith Street, Alan pointed out George, who was talking to some other characters near the Zodiac Bar."²¹

The plan to blow up Caruana in his car was set. Elvey flew up to Glasgow to collect the dynamite from a man called Charles Elliot. But the plot floundered. London and Glasgow police had formed a tag team to keep up with a racket in Scotland that had Kray connections. The team had a Home Office warrant for a wire-tap, and on one such wire-tap it had emerged that Cooper was sending Elvey to Glasgow on BEA flight BE-5019 to pick up the dynamite. Nipper Read informed Glasgow Detective Chief Superintendent Tom Goodall, who arranged for surveillance. On 29 April 1968, Elvey was captured in Glasgow boarding a plane for London with three dozen sticks of gelignite – not an entirely impossible event in a world that had not yet introduced security scanners. "Elvey was just going to place his bag in the overhead locker," Read recalled.

"As we heard, this hitman had gone up to Scotland to get the gelignite from a quarry. Sure, he'd got the gelly, and he still had it on him when he was captured by the police. Cooper came to the flat to confess. The twins were a bit upset but rather more worried if the hitman would squeal," Donoghue recalled.²² But the blunder would cost the Krays big time. It was, in Read's own words, the breakthrough which was to change the emphasis of his inquiry into the as-yet-unsolved Kray murders of Mitchell and McVitie.²³

At London Airport, Elvey's car was searched and in it was found a piece of paper with the registration number of Caruana's car and the words 'red Mini' written on it. At first Elvey denied everything, but within hours Read got him to confess to everything, not just the plans for the Caruana murder but also the suitcase plot and the crossbow attempt. Read thought Elvey

was crazy. When he asked him where the crossbow and the hypodermic needle suitcase were, Elvey replied “quite blandly, ‘in my garage.’” In London, the police organised a search to find the murder weapons. Read had known nothing about these murder plans, but the police found the crossbow, the suitcase with the hypodermic needle and the cyanide in Elvey’s home. “Caruana owned at least one club in Soho outside the Mifsud-Silver syndicate and, so the story went, the Krays had arranged to have Caruana killed,” Read said after learning the story from Elvey. “They had nothing personally against this man, but there were benefits which would accrue to the Firm by his death. The twins would firmly establish themselves as Lords of the Manor and they would be able to exert pressure on Silver, whom I am sure did not want this extreme solution to his quarrel – and gain a share in one or more of his clubs.”²⁴

After Elvey named Cooper as his contact, Read set out to crack the Krays’ fixer. An ‘all points’ was sent out for his arrest, and Alan Bruce Cooper was brought to Tintagel House, the police station where Read held court. Faced with an imminent charge of conspiracy to murder, Read broke Cooper, who confirmed to him that the explosives were intended to kill Caruana, at the behest of the Krays.

Read wanted to keep Cooper in play, not to allow the Krays realise he had turned informer. But the enigma of Cooper started to unravel as well. In a stormy interview in which Read threatened to charge him with three attempted murders, Cooper coolly claimed he had actually been working for Scotland Yard and the CIA – that he had been enlisted by the Secret Service to follow the trail of the Mafia-stolen Canadian bonds passed on to the Krays. Working as an agent provocateur, he was working at the behest of the United States’ Treasury Department, handled by an undercover agent in Paris, and that John Du Rose, Scotland Yard’s Deputy Assistant Commissioner, was entirely knowledgeable about his role in the Krays’ operation. Cooper claimed the murder plots had been essential to retain the twins’ confidence, and that he knew Elvey would bungle up the killings.

The veracity of Cooper’s role in the Krays’ operation remains

a mystery, but it appears the respected Du Rose had tolerated his presence in the entire affair. Read was furious at having been kept in the dark about the “secret agent”, and faced Du Rose about Cooper’s claims. Du Rose admitted that he and Cooper had been in contact for some time, but that he had not been running the spy. “If there had been information, I’d have let you know, Nipper,” Du Rose told Read.²⁵ Read was angry, but remained eager to keep his eyes on the prize – the Krays.

In order to protect Cooper – he had been in daily contact with the twins and his ‘disappearance’ could have set off alarm bells – Read decided to have him admitted to Harley Street clinic upon learning he was having trouble with a stomach ulcer. He made him call Ronnie Kray to explain that he had been taken ill. Read wanted to rig the Harley Street ward with microphones, receivers and tape-recorders, to have Cooper persuade the twins to hold a high-powered meeting in the clinic on the disposal of the bearer bonds and counterfeit currency from Joey Kaufman. But Read’s plot did not work – Ronnie did not visit Cooper. After that, Read took Cooper out of Harley Street and into a Surrey safehouse.

Now he decided to move fast: arrest the Krays in May 1968, calling the detective inspectors at London’s ten crime squad branches, for a 6am raid.

The Krays had been at the Astor Club on the night preceding their arrest, enjoying a night out with Kaufman. Read arrested the twins at their mother’s council flat on the ninth floor of Braithwaite House, Shoreditch – Ronnie was in bed with a man, Reggie with a woman; Kaufman was arrested in his rooms at the Mayfair Hotel. Kaufman had in fact visited Cooper at his Harley Street hospital room to talk about when the bonds would arrive to London. Two days after his arrest, \$190,000 of stolen bearer bonds arrived at his Mayfair Hotel room, daubed with his own fingerprints.

Krays in court, Caruana in the headlines

With the arrest of the Krays and their remand into custody without bail, Read now had to arrest the remaining members of

the gang and ensure they would not end up in the same prison as the twins. Read was planning to use the next month or so to build up more evidence on that given to him by Elvey and Cooper, and it was by all accounts a considerable gamble. There was no real proof of the Caruana murder yet; Cooper was not a trustworthy witness, and much depended on witnesses backing up their statements in court.

Scotland Yard upped the ante, spreading the word within the underworld that it would show no mercy for Kray associates who stood up for the Firm. The pressure started bearing fruit, when Kray gang members in hiding started being arrested, breaking into confession.

All throughout May and June, the twins appeared to be holding court in Brixton Gaol, serene enough that nobody would dare turn on them. But on 6 July, the trial opened for their preliminary hearing to determine if there was a case to answer for at a superior court. The witnesses were produced in court from secret hideouts: one of them was Ronnie's bodyguard Billy Exley. He knew everything and had turned against the twins. The Krays were stunned.

It was at this point, that the name of George Caruana, first mistakenly referred to as "Greek George", hit the headlines as a target of an ambitious assassination.²⁶ The Director of Public Prosecutions wanted Caruana's name to be kept secret until the charge was heard by a magistrate at Bow Street Court. The Krays' counsel had been told the name privately, but sued to have Caruana named publicly. Arguably, the prosecutors wanted to protect Caruana himself and other witnesses.

Lord Parker found no reason to have Caruana's name not mentioned in court.²⁷

The Krays, 34, were charged with conspiring with other persons to murder Caruana the same day they were committed to trial on the charge of murdering Dartmoor escapee 'Mad Axeman' Frank Mitchell, together with co-accused Albert Donoghue, 32.

Prosecutor Kenneth Jones QC described the meeting where the Krays had met Tom Cowley and Cooper in a Bethnal Green

Road pub, The Horn Of Plenty. There Reggie Kray said “he wanted a man killed and explained how difficult the man would be to get at...”²⁸ They had discussed a gun with a silencer, poison and the dynamite. The first weapon of choice to ‘off’ Caruana had been a crossbow with a telescopic sight, purchased for a princely £51 – “lethal up to 50 yards, it is accurate and silent.” At this point, Reggie Kray jumped to his feet in the dock and addressed the magistrate: “Excuse me, but will James Bond be giving evidence in this case? This is all too ridiculous.”²⁹

Elvey had complained that the crossbow had been impossible to use, for which Cooper obliged by procuring him dynamite instead, pressed by Ronnie Kray to go for fireworks “because the delay of obtaining means of killing this man was damaging their prestige... Ronald Kray rejected the idea of the crossbow and a gun with a silencer and it boiled down to the last means of destroying a human being – explosives,” the prosecution said. “As a sequel to the matter, Cooper cooperated with the police. He went into a West End nursing home on May 6 though he was not ill. When he was there, he invited the Krays to come and see him in the room. Ronald Kray did not accept, but sent [Tommy] Cowley.”³⁰

The soft-spoken and bespectacled Elvey revealed himself unfit for the role of professional killer he had been miscast in. In court, he confessed having lacked the nerve to kill Jim Evans inside the Old Bailey in the first of the briefcase plots. “I had no experience in that field,” Elvey said.

“The idea of doing this thing at the Old Bailey seemed to me to be rather ludicrous, but I had to make some sort of effort. I seem to recollect the man was attending the Old Bailey on something to do with a conspiracy case, but I’m not sure. I had reason to believe he was in danger of going to prison shortly and there was some urgency... my nerve failed me.”³¹

Elvey then told the court of the plot to kill Caruana – cyanide, harpoon, telescopic rifle and crossbow, and finally car bomb. But Elvey had no idea he was being followed by police in Glasgow. Did he suspect that it was Cooper himself who had tipped off the police in Glasgow? “There was a time when I suspected

everybody, including Cooper. But it was against his interest. It would have been very foolhardy unless he was leading me up the garden path, and that is impossible," Elvey said of Cooper, whom he described as "more of a show-off than I am... everybody has their moments of exhibitionism."

By the end of July 1968, the case drew to a close. But Bow Street Magistrate Kenneth Barraclough found little to draw a conclusive verdict to find the Krays guilty of the 'Old Bailey' assassination plot.

"I have gone through the evidence with a fine-tooth comb. To me it is so confused and therefore too slim to commit before a jury," he said. The magistrate agreed that Cooper's and Elvey's claims were too outrageous for a jury to take seriously. But Barraclough did find enough evidence to commit the Krays for trial for conspiracy to murder Caruana.

"I want to make it plain that I have to look at these two charges in an entirely separate way. The mere fact that I came to a conclusion on the evidence as a whole on the suitcase allegation does not affect the still vitally important issue, that I must not usurp the function of a jury. Entirely different considerations arise on the other matter, and I have no doubt there is a case to answer."³²

Only one snag: George Caruana was not available as a witness, having disappeared abroad to avoid any chance that he might be killed by any elements of the Syndicate or the Krays.

It mattered little to Nipper Read: because a more fortuitous twist was about to help him nail the Krays. Read had been approached by Kray associate Albert Donoghue for a deal to give evidence on the Mitchell, McVitie and Cornell murders, and the protection rackets. Now Read certainly had bigger fish to fry than the George Caruana conspiracy charge. With the Krays in custody, tongues started to loosen up: their old comrades were refusing to rot in jail, and slowly they came through. Donoghue, Billy Exley, who helped run the long firm frauds, 'Scotch Jack' Dickson, and cousin Ronnie Hart were all turning on the Krays.

And so six months later, the definitive trial for the Krays opened on 7 January, 1969, with 11 men in the dock – and the

twins were duly convicted of the murders of Cornell and McVitie, but cleared of the Mitchell killing. They were jailed for life with a recommendation from the judge that they serve at least 30 years. And they died in prison.

Caruana fled to Gozo for some time. In intermittent trips to London, he would get to face Bernie Silver again, but the Syndicate would never cease to think Caruana as a damaging rival to their interests.

“We had a tip-off that two of the Syndicate’s hatchet men were already searching for Caruana,” Detective Chief Superintendent Bert Wickstead recalled of his attempt to track down Caruana in 1973, when the Syndicate was aware that the Serious Crime Squad was targeting them.³³

As it turns out, Caruana had been warned by one of the Syndicate’s men never to return to London.

“I told Caruana to stay in Malta,” Frank Melito had admitted to Wickstead. “Caruana was a nuisance and he knew too much.”³⁴

-
1. Donoghue, Albert and Short, Martin, *With A Gun In My Hand* (London: John Blake, 2008), vii
 2. Various references to the protection paid by the Maltese to the Krays, among other gangs are made in major works on London gangland. See also Thomas, Donald, *Villains’ Paradise* (New York: Pegasus, 2006) 289
 3. Bennett, John, *Mob Town: A History of Crime and Disorder in the East End* (London: Yale University Press, 2017) 340
 4. All quotes for the 1955 fight taken from: Kray, Charles, *Doing The Business* (London: John Blake, 2011), 22; Kray, Ron, *My Story* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1993), 19-22; Kray, Reg, *Born Fighter* (London: Arrow Books, 1991), 55
 5. Morton, James, *Gangland Soho* (London: Piatkus, 2006) 171
 6. Donoghue, *ibid.*, 208.
 7. BSO, Albert Donoghue, statement of witness, September 26, 1973
 8. “(Victor) Spampinato, who grassed over Tommy Smithson, was a bit of a bully. The Malts had their own little enforcement teams. Carmelo Pace was another of the leaders... The Maltese paid money to Willie Malone who was the governor of the place and in turn he was accountable to the Krays. That’s how it went round.” Mickey Bailey, as told to James Morton, email to author, February 22, 2021.
 9. In 1968, Joey Kaufman, a Jewish-Sicilian businessman connected to the Gallo mafia crew in New York, was said to have organised a meeting between the twins and Philadelphia mafia boss Angelo Bruno, who was scouting London for casino interests and for security in the West End. Ronnie Kray would later believe that he was not being taken seriously enough by his American counterparts, and decided that he would impress them by engineering a series of high profile assassinations.

10. Donoghue, *ibid.*, 208.
11. *ibid.*
12. BSO, Albert J. Donoghue, statement of witness, September 26, 1973
13. Pearson, John, *The Profession of Violence: The Rise And Fall Of The Kray Twins* (London: Williams Collins, 2015), 289.
14. Donoghue, *ibid.*, 202
15. Pearson, *ibid.*, 281
16. Donoghue, *ibid.*
17. Donoghue, *ibid.*, 209
18. Donoghue, *ibid.*, 209
19. BSO, Eugene Paul Elvey, statement of witness, February 21, 1974
20. "Will James Bond Give Evidence Asks Kray," *Daily Mirror*, July 18, 1968
21. BSO, Eugene Paul Elvey, *ibid.*
22. Donoghue, *ibid.*, 210
23. Read, Leonard and Morton, James, *Nipper Read – The Man Who Nicked The Krays* (London: Time Warner, 2002), 214.
24. *ibid.*, 218.
25. *Ibid.*, 219.
26. "Poison Gun For Murder At The Old Bailey," *Daily Mirror*, July 18, 1968.
27. "Mystery man is named in High Court," *Daily Express*, July 6, 1968
28. "Kray twins accused of court murder plot," *Evening Telegraph*, July 17, 1968
29. *ibid.*
30. "Kray court told of alleged plot to kill with poison syringe," *The Birmingham Post*, July 18, 1968
31. "Speedway star got briefcase, Kray court told," *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, July 19, 1968
32. "Krays Are Cleared Of Old Bailey Death Plot," *Daily Mirror*, July 24, 1968
33. Wickstead, Bert, *Gangbuster – Tales of the Old Grey Fox* (London: Futura, 1985), 119
34. BSO, Joseph Medina, statement of witness, February 4, 1973

CHAPTER EIGHT

WICKSTEAD HUNTS DOWN THE SYNDICATE

JOHN Lewis, a young police constable whose beat on the streets included the West End in the early 1970s, had been hand-picked by Scotland Yard's redoubtable Detective Superintendent Albert Wickstead, on what was to become one of the most tumultuous of investigations for the London Metropolitan Police.

In 1972, Commissioner of Police Sir Robert Mark had tasked Wickstead – his hands full dealing with East End gangs such as the Dixons and the Tibbs – with the challenge of rooting out police corruption, specifically among police officers forming part of C1's Obscene Publications Squad, known colloquially as 'The Porn Squad'.

Wickstead had been leading the Serious Crime Squad, formed a year earlier as part of Scotland Yard's C1 division, with a brief "to combat organised crime carried out by known, professional criminals", a response to the psychotic use of violence and murder by gangs such as the Krays and Richardsons, whose associates were still operational after the gangs' leaders had been placed behind bars. Now he was picking the best officers he could find – such as Bernie Tighe from the Fraud Squad, East End officer Roger Stoodley, and "likeable extrovert" John Lewis amongst others – to join him on this crusade. The key targets were the Maltese Syndicate's Big Frank Mifsud and Bernie Silver.

"Wickstead had a reputation of being very straight down the line, very honest," John Lewis says of the man they called the 'Old Grey Fox'. "The driving force of police corruption, as Mark and Wickstead saw it, was that until Silver and Mifsud were arrested, police corruption could not be dealt with properly, because of their association with junior and senior police officers – they were a controlling influence on police officers, with the enormous

wealth that prostitution, porn and gambling was generating for them in the 1960s and 1970s.”¹

But there was one other Soho entrepreneur who wanted in on Silver’s web of police bribery: ‘porn king’ James Humphreys. Humphreys had been one of the first crooks to profit from the porno boom of the late 1960s. Handsome and soft-spoken, within years of serving time in jail he was aiming to get rich in the world of vice, replicating the success of entrepreneurs like Paul Raymond, and running small strip clubs on Old Compton Street and on Macclesfield Street.² No stranger to the system of keeping top police officers sweet with a cash payment, he was a resourceful pretender who wanted to make his own mark on Soho clubland.

The Silver-Mifsud bribery system

By force of the secret coterie of corrupt police officers who acted as gatekeepers to the vice industry in the West End, Humphreys and his wife Rusty sought out the trappings of Bernie Silver’s ‘pax Soho’ with the London police. Successfully, the couple engineered an introduction to CID Commander Wallace Virgo: they wanted to convince Bill Moody, head of the Obscene Publications Squad, to grant them a ‘licence’ – a byword for the police to stay out of his Soho porn business.

The law the ‘porn squad’ had to enforce was the 1964 Obscene Publications Act, which criminalised the possession of “obscene articles” for profit and gain. The imperfection of the law made the prospect of police corruption and bribery irresistible for some. The discriminatory treatment of what could be considered ‘depraved’ material led to an outrageous racket where corrupt police could shake down one operator in favour of another. Constables could get a fiver, sergeants a tenner, a little more to an inspector, a ‘pony’ – £25 – for a chief superintendent, and further up the chain of command, a £50 note at dinner. Silver’s systemic police bribery worked wonders for the Syndicate – top brass could be charmed with the best tables at boxing events and expensive dinners with the wives. So Virgo arranged the deal for Humphreys: £14,000 for the licence, £2,000 a month for Moody,

but with a half-share of the takings for the old godfather Silver (“Moody apparently did not want it to look as though he was allowing newcomers into the fold”).³

Humphreys and his wife Rusty played the game all too well: high-ranking officers would accept the Humphreyses’ paid dinners at exotic nightspots and the best London restaurants. Virgo, Ken Drury – the head of the Flying Squad – and even Moody himself, were on his payroll. But the indiscretion of Drury, with whom Humphreys and his wife Rusty flew on holiday to Cyprus, blew their cover.

In February 1972, a photo of Drury and his wife on holiday with Humphreys appeared in an exposé in *The People* – “Police Chief And The Porn King”. It was the start of a downward spiral.⁴ Drury lied, claiming he had been there looking for Great Train robber Ronnie Biggs. Then he admitted that he and his wife had accompanied the Humphreyses to Cyprus, even stayed in adjoining rooms in the same Famagusta hotel. When the £513 hotel bill was discovered to have been paid by Humphreys, the story fell apart. Drury was suspended.

In his stupidity, Drury told his own story in the *News Of The World*, claiming Humphreys had been his informant. Enraged at being labelled a grass, an invidious tag in the crime world, Humphreys struck back and revealed how Drury had been living out of his pocket.

More was yet to come: in October 1972, Humphreys and his men assaulted Peter Garfath, a conman and former lover of Rusty Humphreys, at the Dauphin Club in Mayfair.⁵ Rusty was arrested in January 1973, and charged with the attack. Jimmy – now in hiding in Amsterdam – was extradited five months later. Four men were accused of attempted murder, and then of attempting to suborn Garfath with £2,000 not to give evidence.

The young Charles Grech ‘il-Likk’ – 23 years of age – an employee of Humphreys and yet to make his own mark in Soho, was charged with conspiring to pervert the course of justice together with Humphreys.⁶ Grech – dubbed Humphreys’s “tool” and “loyal subject” by the prosecution⁷ – stood in the dock, after police had found four tons of hardcore porno inside a walled-

up compartment of a Soho bookshop on Rupert Street.⁸ Grech and Humphreys's men pleaded guilty to possessing obscene magazines, films, books, photographs and playing cards at various shops on Berwick Street, Lisle Street, Great Windmill Street, Rupert Street and Walker's Court.⁹ Grech got the lightest sentence of all: a £300 fine. Two got five years' jail; one Carmelo Cauchi, 22, was sentenced to nine months' jail.

For the Garfath assault, Humphreys had been sentenced to eight years behind bars. But now he had filed a complaint to Scotland Yard, revealing diaries he had kept in a safe at a Dean Street establishment, containing details of illicit dealings with 21 detectives, entries on their meetings at restaurants, complete with an index book of names and telephone numbers.¹⁰ For Wickstead, this would be a double bust of police corruption and the Soho porn kingdom that had suddenly opened up into the world of the Maltese Syndicate: "During that investigation, we had learned something about vice in the West End, and of the shadowy figures, almost exclusively Maltese, who controlled it. We were told that they had become so rich and so powerful that they considered themselves beyond the reach of the law."¹¹

"With the Syndicate involved, no one could afford to make a mistake... Like the Mafia whom they aped, they had a full quota of hit-men and frighteners."¹²

And it was true that the Maltese had until then operated to some extent, free of any attention of the press at a time of permissiveness and where vice had become less of a concern for public morality. But a splash on the *The News Of The World* and inside information from Silver's corrupt connections in Scotland Yard, started raising the alarm.

Reporter Tina Dagliesh had doorstepped Frank Melito at his Water Gardens apartments in Marble Arch, claiming she was doing a washing powder survey – just so that she could see what he looked like. "He had a Yorkshire terrier and a Chihuahua, ratbag dogs... I was thinking of somewhere to get the photographs."¹³ Freelance reporters were dispatched to the prostitutes' flats

above the clubs in Frith Street (The Casbah), on Peter Street, Old Compton Street (The Keyhole), Berwick Street (The Flamingo), Dean Street (Taboo), Greens Court (Folies Bergere Club), and Brewer Street (El Paradiso): the sexual services on offer were myriad, from the ordinariness of a five-minute knee-trembler to the exquisite leather-clad erotica of bondage and whipping, all ranging from £5 to £20.¹⁴

“Everybody knew that there were individuals in London in the vice scene,” Wickstead said in a reflection on his grand investigation. “But this was the first mention we had of a Syndicate, an American mafia-style syndicate running the vice scene in London... and of course they stopped at nothing to either take new premises or an old premises. Violence... they would firebomb clubs... they were operating for 17 years as nobody had done a thing about them... They were clearing something like over a £100,000 a week. They were the Rolls-Royces of the criminal fraternity. The public talks about the Great Train Robbery... £2 million... these people sat back and were quietly coining that on a regular basis.”¹⁵

Bert Wickstead’s case would be built on extracting statements from two old Syndicate soldiers: Philip Ellul and Victor Spampinato, whose blood money for the 1956 contract on Tommy ‘Scarface’ Smithson was never paid up. “Bitter and angry men are often prepared to talk to the police. And I knew that if they were prepared to talk to me and take a stand, the Syndicate’s reign would at long last come to an end,” Wickstead recalled when the 20-year-old case suddenly reopened, with its ultimate target being Big Frank Mifsud, Silver’s partner in crime.¹⁶

Wickstead says his whistleblowers were two “big and burly” informants who had sought him out specifically because they feared nobody else could be trusted in Scotland Yard. “They had good reason to be scared. They were giving the information which would help to bring down the Syndicate, the multi-million pound Mafia-style vice organisation which had ruled Soho for eighteen years. And if their part in this had become known, they would virtually have signed their own death warrants,” he wrote in his 1985 autobiography. “Even today, if the news leaked they

would be in deadly peril. This is why they must, and shall, remain anonymous.”

Who had been the first to talk? Certainly, one of the first men to be interrogated by Wickstead’s men had been Spampinato, who had been acquitted of the 1956 murder. He was questioned by Bernie Tighe and John Lewis in Malta on 12 September 1973, a few months before a planned raid on the Syndicate’s clubs. Scorned by Big Frank, Spampinato had all the reason to volunteer information about the Syndicate and Mifsud’s role in ordering the hit on Tommy Smithson. “I tell you the truth... I think Frank would have had him killed,” Syndicate man Tony Mangion would later tell Wickstead, admitting that nuisances inside the Maltese organisation could always be done away with when the time was right.¹⁷

George Caruana – the Syndicate rival who evaded the Krays’ assassination attempt – also complied with a statement to Wickstead. “People like Caruana were seen as a bit of a threat, because the Syndicate wanted all of the clubs... eliminating competition was part of their mission to make more of this enormous wealth,” John Lewis said, recalling Caruana’s statement. “With Mifsud and Silver there was always the undercurrent that they might well hire people to do something violent to their rivals – as was the case with Caruana. There was a battle in Soho for money, in which the Maltese were very much involved.”¹⁸

Caruana spoke freely to the officers of his problems with Mifsud. “I was continually having trouble with the young fellows who were employed by Big Frank and Bernie. They used to abuse me and spit at me in an endeavour to get me to lose my temper and attack them... they would obstruct potential customers from entering my club. Whilst I was at the Blue Moon I was the owner of a Mini, but I did not take it into the West End as I was afraid that Big Frank and Bernie would put something into it and have me arrested.”¹⁹

After learning of the Krays’ assassination attempt, Caruana had packed his bags and returned to his Gozitan home in Victoria. Six months later, in 1969, he returned to London, only to bump into Bernie Silver in a betting shop. Caruana confronted him,

asking him why he had wanted him dead. “He said he didn’t want me killed, and he would look out for a place for me,” Caruana told Wickstead – strange behaviour from someone who had asked the Krays for a ‘frightener’. But this was a world of the strangest kind of alliances, and Silver did give Caruana a piece of action at a Newport Place café. “I regarded this gesture by Bernie as a means of keeping me sweet and not to say anything about what had happened.”

But with Wickstead’s eye on the Maltese, trouble was brewing. In Malta, Lewis’s and Tighe’s visits to meet Maltese police inspector Alfred Calleja (later Commissioner of Police), were an open secret. Even George Caruana got the heads-up from Syndicate rent-collector Joe Medina. “He told me that he had been in the Casbah Club, and Emanuel Coleiro, Tony Micallef, Big Frank and Bernie Silver were also in there,” Caruana told Wickstead.

“They were having a discussion about me and saying that they would have to get rid of me. He didn’t know how they were going to do it.”²⁰

Medina did admit having informed Caruana that Silver and Mifsud had wanted him seen to – a dangerous witness could cause trouble for them.²¹ But like many who gave Wickstead their statements, Caruana would refuse to back up his statements in court to testify against the Syndicate.

Kidnapping Frank Dyer

The other crucial witness in Wickstead’s investigation had been club owner Frank Dyer – Maltese despite his English surname – and his wife Barbara. A minor satellite within the Syndicate’s gang of pimps, Dyer spoke to British police investigators in Malta in September 1973, three months before Wickstead’s raids on the Syndicate’s top men. A seaman who arrived in Cardiff right after the war in 1947 at just 17, Dyer married Barbara Abbott only three months after meeting her. They moved to Malta, then to London in 1953, where Big Frank set Dyer up with a Dean Street flat for £200 and a weekly £17 rent, to put Barbara ‘to work’.²²

The *News of the World* investigation on the Maltese vice ring

had raised the alarm and Silver and Mifsud were cashing out on the properties, with negotiations held with hospitality groups such as Trusthouse Forte on the sale of Soho properties. Other clubs were being 'sold' off to new Maltese name-lenders.²³ Dyer paid a visit to the Scheherazade Club in the West End, where he met Victor 'Bajzu' Micallef, hoping he could get a cheap price on the property from Mifsud's and Silver's fire-sale. "I heard times are bad," Dyer told Micallef, who just shrugged him off. "No, times will change. Frank and Bernie will fix it, they've got someone in the Home Office who will sort it out."²⁴

It was while Dyer was back in Malta in the summer of 1973, that Wickstead's squad managed to get in touch with him with the help of the Maltese police. Whatever the reason for Dyer's cooperation, the Syndicate's men were tipped off about the statement he had released to police in Malta.

Not only, because with a raid planned for 4 October 1973, the Serious Crime Squad was itself also foiled by a dirty tip-off to the Maltese: Soho was empty, and Silver and Mifsud had taken a timely European holiday, most probably alerted by friends inside Scotland Yard's C11 department for the surveillance of officers.²⁵

Wickstead responded with a wily ruse to fool the Maltese into thinking he was withdrawing the search warrants, enlisting the aid of the press to print stories with headlines such as "The Raid That Never Was", claiming the Serious Crime Squad's operation had been abandoned but that he was now mounting an operation against porn books, convincing the Syndicate his target was anything but vice.²⁶

But just before Wickstead could fire up his frustrated operation again, Dyer was targeted by Big Frank's men.

Dyer – now shuttling between Malta and London on various trips – arrived back in Soho in November 1973, where he was clocked at the Red Mill Club in Soho, a Macclesfield Street club owned by 'Black Frank' Spiteri, also the owner of a sex shop on Wardour Street. Dyer knew the doorman there, Richard Galea, but he was not at work.

So he hitched a ride with Soho denizen Alex 'the Count' Kostanda – a dapper conman whose ties with the Maltese

included having owned a share in a Frith Street club with Ricca killer Joseph Farrugia.²⁷ Kostanda drove him to the Elephant and Castle, where Galea lived. But as he drove away – conveniently for the Syndicate – a group of heavies standing at the pavement laid in wait. Two men inside a Bedford-type van suddenly emerged and bundled Dyer up, driving him off to an unknown location and down the basement of a house.

Dyer's kidnappers sat him down in a chair, slapping him about the head. As he fell to the floor, they started to beat him, hitting him in the groin. Then they tied him to the chair, with the ringleader taking a gun out and pointing it to his face.²⁸

The man pointing the gun at him, a menacing scar on his cheek, speaking a thick Cockney accent, looked the part in his three-quarters leather coat. Two others and the driver kept Dyer in place.

The aggressor looked at him in the eye. "You know what's going to happen to you and the others... Four of you have made statements about a gun Frank had given to someone... we need to know what help you have given police in the statements."

Dyer denied telling the police about the gun in the Smithson murder. But the man accused him that he, Spampinato, and two others – Joe Pace and Joseph Grech – had ratted out Mifsud. "You're making a mistake. I ran away from police 14 years ago. They'd have arrested me if I went to them," Dyer pleaded, the gun firmly pressed to his temple.

Inquiries were made on the phone: apparently the kidnappers were speaking to Victor 'Bajzu' Micallef. "I'm sorry for what happened," one of the attackers then told Dyer. "You're very lucky, but the other three won't be as lucky."

Dyer was dropped off in Soho. From his hotel, he called Barbara and Maltese superintendent John Cachia, then liaising with Scotland Yard.

The next day he set off to give police a statement at Limehouse station, but not before stopping off at the Red Mill and give Black Frank Spiteri a piece of his mind – Spiteri tried to placate him, apologising and blaming Joe Medina about the "mix-up".

It was truly a convoluted charade, because the Syndicate was intent at making Dyer shut up. First, they sent Vincent Stevens, like Dyer a Żabbar man, to convince Kostanda to have a word with him: £20,000 from Frank Spiteri was the generous offer to leave London so as not to testify.²⁹ Then, a more direct approach, this time to Barbara Dyer at her basement flat on Shaftesbury Avenue – someone “middle-aged, wearing a round Trilby hat”, warning her that Romeo Saliba was raising the cash “to have [Dyer] disappear”. She was petrified.³⁰

Raid on the Scheherazade

At 1:30am on 30 December, 1973, the curtain came down on the Maltese Syndicate as Wickstead led the first of many raids and arrests that would topple one domino after the other.

Wickstead and D.S. Bernie Tighe and his officers made their way to the Scheherazade Club – the Syndicate’s meeting spot – on narrow Tisbury Court, which connected Rupert Street to Wardour Street. Spotting the incoming phalanx, the club doorman turned to run inside and raise the alarm – Tighe downed him with a flying tackle. Down the stairs the cops went, to find the club heaving, a band playing on stage. Tighe powered his way through and snatched the microphone from the singer, a “buxom blonde” by Wickstead’s recollection.³¹ “This is a police raid. Everyone remain where you are.” The audience looked around as the band’s clatter ground to a halt. Wickstead walked up to the stage. “I am Detective Chief Superintendent Wickstead from Scotland Yard. These premises are being raided. Everyone remain where you are until my officers see you.”³² As Wickstead recalls, “a little light relief came when a customer asked his friend how he was enjoying the show so far. ‘Rubbish,’ was the reply. Even some of the policemen smiled.” Convoys of police cars shuttled off all witnesses inside the club from the West End to Limehouse in the East – the band and singer included. Among the arrests made in the club was that of ‘Black Frank’ Spiteri and Victor Micallef.

In the meantime, another 150 officers were rounding up the rest of the Syndicate’s men. The doorbell at 35, Eccleston

Square on Pimlico, one of a row of elegant Georgian houses, rang repeatedly at 1:30am on 30 December, 1973. It was one of three houses owned by Anthony 'Terinu' Mangion, the other two being handsome properties located on nearby Gloucester Street and Warwick Way. Detective Constables Geoffrey Wragg and John Bland looked up, where a head popped out of the second-storey window. A woman, Linda Dawkins, looked down at the officers.

"I want to speak to Anthony Mangion," Bland called out. Mangion wasn't at home, she said... but as the constables made their way upstairs, they found their man getting out of bed inside Flat 2. "We're police officers and we have a warrant to search your premises," Wragg told Mangion. "Get dressed and be present at this search: you are being arrested for murder, and you will be taken to Limehouse Police Station where you will be interviewed by Detective Chief Superintendent Wickstead."³³

At Mangion's house, police lifted correspondence on various Soho properties and City of Westminster rates for the West End clubs, all addressed to the Syndicate's men and name-lenders: Mangion, Victor Micallef, Peter Falzon, Francis Vassallo, and other names who handled their affairs back home, profit-and-loss sheets for the clubs, and private agreements showing silent partners behind the clubs.³⁴

Joseph Medina, driving his Ford Zephyr on Frith Street, was intercepted at 3am, and taken to Limehouse. At 4:30am, at 14, Upstall Road on the other side of the Thames – Big Frank's address – his brother Joseph Mifsud was woken up by Detective Constable Roger Stoodley. "What's all this about?" Mifsud said as police officers forced open the door of his house. In a padlocked kitchen cupboard, police found packets of cash stuffed between toys and boxes, all packed in separate bundles, and cash books with the names of women on them. "I think this money comes from flats and toms [prostitutes] in the West End and you are looking after it for Frank," Stoodley told him. "No sir, I earned it... I work in the club as a carpenter."³⁵ No sign of Big Frank. He was in Ireland, having long taken cover from the first wave of raids.

Bernie Silver had been arrested right before the Sheherazade raid on 29 December, collected from outside the Park Towers Hotel

in Knightsbridge at 10:15pm, where he was with his mistress, the former Bunny Girl model Kathleen ‘Dominique’ Ferguson. D.S. John Lewis and Bernie Tighe showed Silver their warrant, and off they went into the detectives’ motor. “The warrant is for incitement to murder – it concerns the case of Tommy Smithson.” Silver shrugged it off: “Yes that should be interesting... the flats and all that stuff from years back, I suppose.”

At Limehouse, Wickstead questioned Silver at 4:15am – recalling him as quite good looking, and “very, very sure of himself. He clearly regarded me as a country copper who would be no match at all for him in a battle of wits... His police connections were so powerful in those days, that I think he really did believe himself to be inviolate, certainly beyond the reach of poor old plodding coppers such as I.”³⁶

Silver sipped his tea and smoked a cigarette, steadfast in providing Wickstead only a flow of ‘no comments’ to his questions. “Sometime in late ’66 or ’67 you went to the Gallipoli restaurant in Broad Street and met the Kray twins. And you, the twins, Donoghue and Cowley were there, do you remember?” Wickstead told Silver. “You talked with them for half an hour. You wanted a Maltese man named George Caruana seen to.”

Silver kept his steely cool: “Yes. It didn’t happen, did it?”

“In fairness you only wanted him beaten up but the twins wanted to murder him,” Wickstead continued. “I certainly didn’t want to murder him. All he needed was a lesson,” Silver replied.

But the Jewish mobster refused to confirm having paid the Krays for the job, or that he was regularly paying them protection money through collector Joe Schaeffer. “Mr Wickstead, what can I say? You have obviously done your job. I can’t say we weren’t expecting it, can I? I should have known about you and not come back.”

As Wickstead read out Silver his charges, the Syndicate boss ominously warned: “You’ll never get your witnesses... you’ve cautioned me. This is serious. I don’t have to answer your questions.”³⁷

The interrogations revealed a world of interconnected gang interests inside the West End. Silver and Big Frank controlled the

law by making sure they bribed enough high-ranking officers by putting them on a regular payroll. Big Frank's brother Joseph handled the cash collected from the rents by Nazzareno 'Jabarello' Galea, Joseph Medina, and Emmanuel Bartolo.³⁸ Joseph Mifsud pleaded with Wickstead: "Call that a living?" he said about the cash from the rentals. "*They* earned money, not me. It's their flats, they just pay me... I collect money for them. I do as I'm told. I'm not a rich man... I only a little fish, them the big fish."³⁹

But Mifsud did say it was Big Frank who wanted Frank Dyer to stay out of London, instructing him (Joseph) to see that Spiteri and *Bajzu* keep him away. "We all heard of him, a grass. Everyone knows you get him from Malta, he make a statement about Frank and Bernie. Medina told Bernie, he told me innit... I phoned (Big Frank): Frank Dyer is a bad man. Frank said Dyer should be seen to."

"What they did I don't know. I was at my club... I'm not violent. I didn't take him. I passed on the message... I collect money for them and run clubs, that's all. I think they just take him away and find out things. I don't know they have guns."⁴⁰

One man who would eagerly volunteer sweet revenge for Mifsud was Paul 'the Priest' Inguanez, scorned by Big Frank after he was kicked out of a Soho apartment and then out of his job. Even he had been marked out as a troublemaker by the Syndicate, recalling some advice he got from Emanuel Bartolo: "One day all this will blow up in Soho," Bartolo had told him. "We'll all be in trouble, but Frank and Bernie won't go to prison, they will never go. It will be the rest of us. Why don't you try and forget all about it? After all, be careful Paul, here is Soho you can get shot, you know. We know what's going on Paul, no need to tell me."⁴¹

But Inguanez gave Wickstead's men information on all the Syndicate's partnerships: the Taboo was owned by Big Frank, Silver, Tony Micallef and Tony Mangion; the Naked City was owned by Victor Micallef and Big Frank; the Perfumed Garden, formerly the Americano, was owned by Mifsud, with three prostitute flats above it; the Gigi in Frith Street, was owned by Silver and Mifsud, together with two overhead flats; the Can Can was owned by Silver, Mifsud and Emanuel Coleiro, together with

three flats; the Blue Moon had been leased back from Cypriot entrepreneur John Aziz, together with the flats above, with Tony Mangion, Paul Cardona, Victor Micallef, Silver and Mifsud; the El Paradiso was owned by Silver, Mifsud, Tony Micallef and Emanuel Bartolo; the Oriental was Big Frank's; the Red Mill was run by Black Frank Spiteri for Mifsud and Silver; the Blue City on Peter Street was for Silver and Mifsud, with an entire building opposite housing three storeys of prostitutes' flats; and then the Folies Bergere on Greens Court, the Metro Club on D'Arblay Street, Smiths Courts and St Ann's Court... all owned by Silver and Mifsud to run prostitutes' flats. The licences had been issued to strawmen – Thomas Pearson (Blue City), Paul Barber (El Paradiso), Robert Duffy (Oriental), and Michael Preston (Taboo). Nobody could spot any Maltese names on the official licence registers.⁴²

'Black' Frank Spiteri was pressed hard on the Dyer kidnapping. In broken English, Spiteri gave Wickstead an idea of what Big Frank thought of someone like Dyer: "He is a no good man. He cause trouble for us... I'm a truthful man. I have no record. But I must do what I'm told. They have so much influence. Joe Mifsud he come and see me and *Bajzu*, and tell us that there is a lot of trouble with this Dyer for everybody and Big Frank say he want him done."⁴³

Spiteri admitted setting up a band of Silver's men to kidnap Dyer. "They would warn him off. They are bad men, but I don't know how they do it... Medina told me Dyer had spoken to police in Malta and they had spoken to Victor Spampinato about Bernie and Big Frank. I apologise to him. I made a big mistake. I do as I'm told."

By the end of the day, Wickstead had all Big Frank's main associates and minor partners under arrest – Bernard Silver of course, who denied the charges, Tony Mangion, Frank Spiteri, Joseph Medina, Victor Micallef, Big Frank's brother Joseph with the charge of kidnapping Frankie Dyer ("Bloody ridiculous", he retorted at hearing the charges),⁴⁴ Larry Agius, Joe Debono, Emanuel Bartolo, Nazzareno Galea, and even hot dog seller Harold Stocker, the *Americano* firebomb witness. Joseph Medina

and Frank Melito were interrogated in February 1974.

Joe Debono, the Big Frank henchman, was arrested on 4 January 1974. "If you haven't got Big Frank now, you never will," he boasted to the arresting officers. "You will never make it stick. Big Frank has taken care of everything." And yet he sang like a bird, telling police Big Frank had offered £1,000 to anyone who could get the 1967 Americano bombing pinned on Tony Cauchi. "It was not my idea, I did what was told of me."

Oreste Debono, a doorman at the Taboo Club, claimed Big Frank had muscled in on Frank Spiteri to take a higher cut on profits. Spiteri had been leasing the club from Tony Mangion and Mifsud. "I saw Frank Spiteri coming up the stairs and he was crying. Frank Mifsud left the club. Spiteri told me that Mifsud had told him he wanted a share in our takings from the club. We talked it over for a while and Spiteri was very upset about it all. We did not want to share any of our money with Frank Mifsud as he had nothing to do with us and the running of the club. We decided to get out of the club, as we knew Mifsud would cause us aggravation if we stayed and did not pay."⁴⁵

Detectives also picked up Vincent Stevens – him of the £20,000 bribe. Like Dyer a migrant from the 50s, he protested his arrest by Detective Sergeant John Farley. "I'm not in the big league... Dyer's a friend of mine, we grew up together."⁴⁶

Stevens reasoned with his interrogators. "I said Frank in the Red Mill doesn't want any trouble: they'll pay to keep out of trouble, enough to keep Dyer comfortable in Malta for the rest of his life. I just said 'now is the time to squeeze them'. Money is their god and Frank in the Red Mill will pay. He can get enough money from them to retire to Malta for the rest of his life."

Now he claimed he was not the messenger – he had only suggested to Kostanda how Dyer could take an opportunistic pay-off. Farley was having none of it, accusing Stevens of attempting to pervert the course of justice. "They're evil men," Stevens said. "They have lived off us for years. I'm still saying nobody told me to say it."

The Maltese empire had been dislocated, with no bonds of loyalty among this loose alliance of club managers and brothel-

keepers. “They could see that, after the *News of the World* investigation, the empire was falling, so they saw an opportunity for themselves,” John Lewis remembers. “So some of it was disloyalty, but it was also a personal bid not to seem too involved in the business – everyone was well aware that Mifsud and Silver ran the show, so the rest wanted to look after themselves, saying ‘it was him, not me...’. Once Frank fled the country and Silver was in custody, there was an opportunity for others to start running the business themselves.”⁴⁷

Trial at the Old Bailey

The trial of the Maltese Syndicate opened at the Old Bailey on 19 September, 1974, before Mr Justice Geoffrey Lane. Eleven men appeared in the dock: Anthony Mangion, 48, Joseph Medina, 56, Frank Melito, 41, Emanuel Bartolo, 41, Bernie Silver, 54, Victor Micallef, 33, Lawrence Agius, 43, and Nazzareno Galea, 43, all charged with conspiracy to live off earnings from prostitution; Romeo Saliba and Bartolo had another charge added to theirs for a Berwick Street whorehouse, and Melito for the premises on Half Moon Street. Joseph Medina and Emanuel Coleiro had been arrested but Coleiro managed to escape the net.

Saliba changed his pleas to guilty on the second day of the trial, and was remanded until the conclusion of the case for sentencing. Joseph Debono, 39, was charged with conspiring to pervert the course of justice, and hot dog seller Harold Dennison Stocker, 42, was remanded on bail; both men were accused of conspiring to pervert the course of justice on the 1967 firebomb investigation, masterminded by Big Frank.

Additionally, doorman Frederick Henry Brett and Vincent Stevens were charged with the kidnapping of Frank Dyer, with Stevens alone charged of having attempted to pervert the course of justice by paying off Dyer ‘to disappear’. Brett and Stevens were charged along with Victor Micallef and Big Frank’s brother Joseph Mifsud, of imprisoning Dyer, and Bartolo of having assaulted him.

Concurrently, Silver and Anthony Mangion were charged with the Tommy Smithson murder of 1956 – Silver was also

charged with two incitements to murder and Mangion with one incitement to murder.⁴⁸ Frank Mifsud, charged with running the empire of vice, had been on the run in Ireland but was later located in Switzerland.

Crown counsel Michael Corkery outlined the case to the jury:

“For 18 years, Mr Silver and Mr Mifsud had made rich pickings; they acquired leasehold and freehold properties in the Soho area and often ran striptease clubs or ‘near beer’ establishments in the basement or ground floor of the premises. The floors above were where the prostitutes worked in separate flats. They paid what were clearly inflated rents, more than £100 a week; that was about average for one room or possibly two. Prostitutes working full-time could earn between £200 and £600 a week. There were replacements as one prostitute went off somewhere else. Indeed, it would appear that sometimes there was almost a shift system. A room would be rented out to a prostitute on the basis that she worked from noon until 1am, and when she left, someone would take over the premises.”

Prostitution, Corkery pointed out, was not a crime but “a social fact deplorable in the eyes of a great majority in this country, and the law tried to discourage it.”

Silver and Mifsud were the principals of “a vicious enterprise” that lived off the earnings of prostitution, having spent two decades hiding their factory-line of prostitution behind their henchmen: until the day of reckoning in December 1973.⁴⁹

Silver and Mifsud’s frontmen were rent collectors and took shares in property, acting as managers for the Syndicate; the two leaders never dealt directly with the prostitutes, and properties were in the names of nominees that could not be traced to the real owners. Corkery produced documents found in Silver’s flat, showing he had been negotiating the purchase of a £27,000 yacht, and that he had substantial credit facilities in a Belgian bank and property interests in the Channel Islands.⁵⁰ “These two have indeed made a rich living,” he said of Silver and Mifsud. “Collectors would take rents from prostitutes or their £8-a-day maids. After taking their own cut they would pass the rest of the

money further up to the chain. And so, the Syndicate prospered while the main characters kept in the background.”⁵¹

Corkery roughly outlined the hierarchy beneath Silver and Mifsud, with Anthony Mangion and Victor Micallef owning various property shares, and next down the scale, Saliba, Melito and Emanuel Bartolo, followed by rent collectors Medina, Agius and Galea, and occupying a kind of managerial role, though hard to fit within this chain of command, was Big Frank’s brother Joseph.

“This is an unsavoury case about an unsavoury part of London,” Corkery told the jury. “It is a world of prostitutes, ponces and pimps. The witnesses are drawn from that very background. The witnesses worked in the area and know what was going on. A lot of them are Maltese – a lot are prostitutes.”⁵²

The first prosecution witness was Francis Vassallo, a 1950s migrant who worked the ‘membership cards’ for the Blue Moon Club – he pinpointed all the Syndicate members running the properties for prostitutes.⁵³ Old-timer Romeo Saliba described the roster system for the brothel-cum-flats, which men held shares in which club, the prostitutes’ earnings, and how much ‘drink money’ was paid to the collectors.⁵⁴ Flats owned by Silver and Mifsud with other partners would charge rents of £75-£100, even £130 a week; the partners ensured rent would be coming in even when leaseholders or the property owners were in jail. Bartolo had boasted to him about running 80% of the West End prostitute flats: “He also gets the drink for putting the girls in. Also he arranges for a relief girl to go if a girl is sick or goes away and if he hasn’t got a girl he would send his own wife.”⁵⁵

Paul ‘the Priest’ Inguanez, scorned by Big Frank and disliked by the Syndicate men, relished the opportunity to give evidence on the direct relationship between the strip clubs and the prostitutes’ flats: “I would like to leave to the imagination of this honourable court what the feelings of customers were likely to be after they had sat in the striptease club watching naked girls... what they were likely to do after they decided to leave.” Judge Lane encouraged him to elaborate: “Of course, the doorman was always quite ready to oblige by saying ‘there’s one or two above

the club'..."⁵⁶

Tony 'Derek' Galea, who took the rap for the 1967 firebombing of the Americano club and later for perjury in the same case, also testified on the Syndicate's set-up. And there was also James Hing, a Chinese tenant of the Syndicate's flats who found his staircase had been chopped down by the Maltese, when he refused to move out of a flat above a club to make way for a prostitute to take up occupancy.⁵⁷ Of course, it helped that he had been in Tony Cauchi's employ, still with an axe to grind against the Syndicate over the firebombings, which he insisted even after his release from prison, had not been his doing.

In his defence, Bernie Silver obtained character references from three senior police officers attesting to his good character. But the case was clear-cut: after 13 weeks, the trial came to an end on 19 December 1974.

Seven men stood in the dock. The heaviest sentence went to Bernie Silver, who got six years in jail and fined £30,000. Bartolo and Mangion were each jailed for five years and fined £10,000. Melito was acquitted on the main Soho vice charge, but found guilty of operating a smaller organisation in Mayfair with Saliba, and was sentenced to four years and fined £5,000. Victor Micallef was jailed for three years, while Joseph Mifsud was given two years. Saliba, who pleaded guilty to both the Soho and Mayfair vice rings, got a lenient nine-month sentence.

Sentencing Silver, Lord Justice Geoffrey Lane said: "The properties actually owned by you may have been small in number, but for years now you have been responsible for running a highly profitable business based on vice and on the capacity of prostitutes in Soho to earn large sums of money, and upon their ability to pay exorbitant rents for the flats of which you and your fellow conspirators were owners. You employed every possible device and artifice, and your not inconsiderable intelligence, to try to escape detection, and later attempted to avoid conviction... The profits you reaped were enormous and it is quite clear you are a very wealthy man as a result of these activities."⁵⁸

And that was it. Wickstead's first job in hollowing out the Maltese vice empire had been done. Now, he was going for the

double: getting both Silver and Big Frank Mifsud jail time for the 1956 Tommy Smithson murder, a much more complex case.

Frank Dyer, reaping the benefits of having aided in the decapitation of the Syndicate, thrived in his own tiny patch of Soho vice for a few more years.

But now the taxman wanted his head, with an investigation from the Inland Revenue Department on his West End profits from the Windmill strip club, a sex cinema, and a Greek Street property used for prostitutes. The matter was left up to a tribunal to decide: an unbelievable £250,000 in back-taxes and penalties owed by “super pimp” Frank Dyer, the headlines ran.⁵⁹ Far from staying on to pay it, Dyer decided to pack up and go back to Malta.

Dyer appealed, but by the time the case came up he had managed to sell off his £142,000 house on charming Caroline Place in Bayswater, just off Hyde Park, as well as his £65,000 Greek Street property. Despite his property wealth, Dyer was actually a council tenant in a flat in Southwark, and later in King’s Cross, at a subsidised rent of £13.41 a week: in his application for a transfer to the latter flat, the reason he gave was “Repercussion of court case, as Mr Dyer’s whereabouts has been discovered by his enemies” and it was the “nearest estate to a police station”.

But Dyer was far from some council flat pauper. Settling back in Malta in 1980, he insisted with the press that what he owed the taxman was “chicken-feed”. “I’m saying goodbye to Britain forever. It hasn’t been a bad life, but I’m not coming back with the taxman out to rob me.”

Medina too would finally be sentenced years later in 1977 – 18 months’ imprisonment.

In the meantime, while serving time Syndicate man Victor ‘Bajžu’ Micallef would lose his estranged wife.

He had taken Swedish hostess Berit Irene Johansson in 1967 in a marriage of convenience that allowed her to work the flats at 16 Stanhope Row.⁶⁰ In 1979, now a destitute alcoholic, Irene Micallef committed suicide, falling seven floors to her death from the roof of Cambridge Court on Star Street, just off

Edgware Road. Police inspecting her flat found her bedclothes in disarray, with pornographic books and a cooking-pot filled with vomit beside the bed.⁶¹

-
1. John Lewis, Interview with author, 2 September, 2022
 2. Willetts, Paul, *The Look Of Love* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2010), 191.
 3. Morton, James, *Gangland Soho* (London: Piatkus, 2008), 213
 4. "Fraud Squad's No. 2 stayed at Soho ex-crook's Cyprus flat," *The Sunday People*, March 5, 1972
 5. "Strip-Club Wife Is Held In Big Porn Blitz," *Daily Mirror*, January 30, 1973
 6. "£2,000 bail in porn case," *The Birmingham Post*, February 10, 1973
 7. Trevor Davies, Ronald Bergen, Gabor Stresznyak, Patrick Dunn, William Murdoch, Henry Murdock, and Anthony Trinidad were the other men charged.
 8. "Eleven in court after police porn raid," *The Birmingham Post*, January 31, 1973
 9. "23 in court on porn charges," *The Birmingham Post*, June 8, 1973
 10. Kirby, Dick, *Scotland Yard's Gangbuster*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2018) *ibid.* 119.
 11. Wickstead, Bert, *Gangbuster – Tales of the Old Grey Fox* (London: Futura, 1985), 115
 12. Wickstead, *Ibid.*
 13. Taylor, S.J., *Shock! Horror! The Tabloids In Action* (London: Black Swan, 1992), 302.
 14. NA, J/267/452, Mangion, Anthony and others: charged with conspiracy to live wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution; exhibits, Statement of Witness, Simon Regan
 15. BBC, *The Underworld* (9/3/1994) – online video, June 30, 2022, https://youtu.be/_aWH5D6Mejk
 16. Wickstead, *Ibid.*, 117
 17. BSO, Anthony Mangion, statement of witness
 18. Interview with John Lewis
 19. BSO, George Caruana (b. 16/9/1930), statement of witness, October 1, 1973
 20. BSO, George Caruana, *Ibid.*
 21. BSO, Joseph Medina, statement of witness, February 4 1974
 22. BSO, Frank Dyer (b. 1/3/1930), statement of witness, September 14, 1973
 23. NA, J/267/452, Mangion, Anthony and others: charged with conspiracy to live wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution; exhibit 117, 39 Dean Street valued at £130,000
 24. "Man from Syndicate collected £100,000 in rents from prostitutes, Crown says," *The Times*, September 21, 1974
 25. Kirby, *ibid.* 126
 26. Wickstead, *ibid.* 122
 27. "3 Men In A Club," *Lewisham Borough News*, October 25, 1960. Real name 'Alexis Varipati', Kostanda was aged around 60 in 1973, having arrived with his parents in the United Kingdom in 1918 from Smyrna (Turkey) and had a criminal record that included escaping from prison, impersonating a police officer, and conspiracy to cheat customers.
 28. BSO, Frank Dyer, statement of witness, November 23, 1973
 29. BSO, Frank Dyer, statement of witness, January 19, 1973
 30. *Ibid.*

31. Wickstead, *ibid.* 122
32. BSO, Bernard Tighe, Detective Sergeant, statement of witness, February 20, 1974
33. BSO, Anthony Mangion, statement of witness, December 30, 1973
34. NA, J 267/451, Mangion, Anthony and others: charged with conspiracy to live wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution; case papers
35. BSO, Joseph Mifsud, statement of witness, December 30, 1973
36. Wickstead, *ibid.* 118
37. *ibid.* 124
38. BSO, Joseph Medina, statement of witness, February 4, 1973
39. BSO, Joseph Mifsud, *ibid.*
40. BSO, Joseph Mifsud, *ibid.*
41. BSO, Paul Inguanez (b. 10/2/29), statement of witness, March 6, 1974
42. "New drive on Soho Clubs," *The Guardian*, January 22, 1974
43. BSO, Bernard Tighe, Detective Sergeant, statement of witness Frank Spiteri, February 15, 1974
44. BSO, Kenneth Tolbart, statement of witness, February 2, 1974
45. BSO, Oreste Debono (b. 8/8/1936), statement of witness, March 11, 1974
46. BSO, Vincent Stevens, statement of witness, February 19, 1974
47. Interview with John Lewis
48. "Two accused of a 1956 murder," *Daily Mirror*, January 24, 1974
49. "Gan Ran Empire Of Vice – Claim," *Liverpool Echo*, September 19, 1974
50. "Witness against Soho vice empire kidnapped and offered £20,000 to 'vanish'; court told," *The Times*, September 20, 1974
51. "Syndicate cashed in on an evil web of vice," *Daily Mirror*, September 20, 1974
52. "The Syndicate ran Soho vice empire, says Crown," *Evening Chronicle*, September 19, 1974
53. "I Knew Vice Syndicate Men – Witness," *The Liverpool Echo*, September 23, 1974
54. "Court told vice girls paid £100 for a £10 room," *The Guardian*, September 25, 1974
55. NA, J 267/451, Mangion, Anthony and others: charged with conspiracy to live wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution, Romeo Saliba, Statement of Witness, 8 April, 1974
56. "Strip Clubs A Vice Lure," *The Liverpool Echo*, September 26, 1974
57. Kirby, *ibid.* 133.
58. "Heads Of Vice Empire Gaoled," *The Liverpool Echo*, December 19, 1974
59. "Vice Man Dodges £250,000 Bill For Taxman," *Sunday People*, March 9, 1980
60. BSO, Berit Evelyn Irene Micallef née Johansson, statement of witness, January 4, 1974
61. "Death leap wife could not take it anymore," *Marylebone Mercury*, August 24, 1979