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COMMISSION ON CIA ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

Washington, DC 20500

178-10002-10214

May 17, 1975

MEMORANDUM

TO : The File
FROM : David W. Belin
SUBJECT : Interview with James P. O'Connell

Belin: This is a memorandum of an interview with James P. O'Connell, who resides at--

O'Connell:

B: And what's your zip code there?

O:

B: And what's your 'phone number?

O:

B: The date of this interview is May 17, 1975, and Mason Cargill of the Commission staff is also present. I reviewed with Mr. O'Connell matters pertaining to an alleged plot to assassinate Fidel Castro of Cuba. Mr. O'Connell says that he is not certain now concerning particular dates when matters might or might not have taken place because they involve situations that took place approximately fifteen years ago. And he also says that he believes that he made some notes which the last time he knew the notes were in the personal safe of Howard Osborne who was then Director of the Office of Security, and he indicates that with regard to particular matters of this interview that the best recollection he could make would be if he had the notes in front of him. He is going and try to see if he can get those notes but the interview is going to be based on his best recollection now in the absence of his notes. Is that accurate, Mr. O'Connell?

O: Correct.

B: Mr. O'Connell I believe that you said that you came to the CIA from the FBI approximately in 1951. Is that correct?


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- O: December 1951.
- B: And when you came to the CIA, what did you do?
- O: I was assigned to the Office of Security and initially my first assignment was a desk chief, the title of--at that time, I believe was Covert Security Clearance Branch, or Desk.
- B: And then what did you do?
- O: Well, I progressed through the years in the Office of Security--it's the only office I ever worked with in the CIA, and eventually when I retired two years ago, I was Deputy Director of Security for Physical, Technical, and Overseas Affairs.
- B: I believe you said that you were in the metropolitan Washington area during the latter part of the 1950s until approximately June of 1962?
- O: That's correct, I was assigned in the Washington area until I went overseas--the Far East--in June of '62.
- B: During the 1950s, did you ever have an opportunity to become acquainted with Robert Maheu?
- O: Yes, I did.
- B: And what was the occasion of that?
- O: The occasion was about 1952 or '53. He was at that time working independently as a security consultant and he had just left the job with Small Business Administration where he was the Security Officer and he was striking out for himself. Robert Cunningham, who was my boss at that time, knew Maheu and the FBI had high regard for his capabilities and abilities, and we were looking for a covert asset in the Office of Security and Mr. Maheu was struggling in the sense that he didn't have very much capital. We gave him a retainer so he could open up an office and in return he did certain assignments for us.
- B: In the Office of Security.
- O: For the Office of Security.
- B: For the Office of Security. Maheu had been an FBI agent at one time. Is that correct?

O: Right.

B: And do you remember off-hand what the retainer was?

O: I believe we gave him \$500 a month.

B: Subsequently, did you have contact with him from time to time over the latter part of the 1950s?

O: Well, from the time I was assigned as his case officer, which was approximately 1953-54, again I'm not too sure of the dates, I handled him, if you want to call it that, until 1962 when I went overseas.

B: You were his case officer?

O: Right.

B: Now, I want to ask you whether or not you ever heard inside the Agency of any plans or schemes which might have involved the assassination of any foreign leader other than Fidel Castro?

O: I can say categorically no.

B: To the best of your knowledge has the Agency ever been involved in any plots involving murder or assassination of anyone in this country?

O: Not to my knowledge.

B: Now, Mr. O'Connell, some time in the latter part of 1960, according to our interview before we started making this tape, you said that Shef Edwards came to you with regard to a particular matter. Is that correct?

O: That's correct.

B: Could you just relate what Edwards said to the best of your recollection and what you said.

O: Yes. He indicated that he had gotten the--the office had gotten--the assignment to come up with somebody or some organization that could take on the assassination of Fidel Castro, and he thought perhaps Bob Maheu might know somebody that we could contact or he could contact, and I was told to talk to Bob, which I did.

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- B: Did Edwards state to you who gave him the assignment?
- O: Well, as far as I recall he said it was Bissell.
- B: Did he ever state whether or not the Director of Central Intelligence, Mr. Dulles, knew about the matter?
- O: Yes, he did.
- B: And what did he say?
- O: He said it had the approval of Mr. Dulles.
- B: All right. Do you have any idea of approximately when such a conversation would have taken place between you and Edwards?
- O: No. Not at all. I--as I say--I think I have or I have some sort of material that may give the approximate dates, but I don't know at this point.
- B: Do you know whether it would have been in 1960 or in 1961?
- O: My guess would be probably 1960, but again I just can't be sure.
- B: Do you know if it would have been in 1960 if it would have been in the first part or the last part of 1960?
- O: Well, I do recall that I think it was October that I met Roselli for the first time, and that was at the Plaza Hotel in New York, and my guess is it was probably October 1960, but again I don't--it could have been 1961.
- B: All right. Really, what you're saying is that you have no exact recollection as to when it was except your best recollection right now was that it was in the Fall of 1960. Is that correct?
- O: That's right.
- B: Now you mentioned Roselli. Before we get to Mr. Roselli, did you get in touch with Maheu?
- O: I didn't know Roselli. Maheu was the man that contacted Roselli.

B: All right. After Edwards talked to you to get in touch with Maheu. Did you get in touch with Maheu?

O: Yes.

B: And what did you say to Maheu, and what did he say to you, if you remember?

O: Well, I explained what the project was all about. He wasn't particularly happy about taking on the assignment, primarily, I guess, because he was getting very close with the Hughes people and they were demanding a lot of his time and he didn't feel he could spend too much time with us, but he did also recognize the fact that we had in the past subsidized him, and he felt that he owed us the --he was committed to a degree, and he took it on on that basis.

B: And then what happened?

O: Well, he said he knew a fellow out in Las Vegas, because at that point that's where Hughes was operating out of. He didn't know his background but he figured he must be somewhere involved with organized groups out there because he--as he understood it--he had the ice machine concession of all the casinos out there, and he identified him as a fellow by the name of Roselli. I met Roselli--he came in to New York--

(End of tape 1, begin tape 2)

B: Now you mention that you met Roselli in New York. Was that pursuant to a pre-arranged plan with Maheu?

O: That's correct. He asked Roselli to come to New York and that he had something he wanted to talk with him about. I was introduced to Roselli as an associate of Bob Maheu--the discussion pretty much on the basis of Maheu having several international clients who had interests down in Cuba. They were concerned about losing their investments, and they were pooling together a sum of money that they could offer if somebody could eliminate Fidel Castro. Initially Roselli didn't want any part of it. We did appeal to him on the basis that this was in the best interest of national security--at that time of course we were aware of the fact that the Cubans--the Russians were bringing in missiles, and so forth and that they were threatening the country.

B: Well, let me backtrack a minute. The Cuban missile crisis was in October of 1962, and I believe you said that you left for the Far East in June of 1962, but of course, did you mean that this conversation took place when the Soviets were bringing missiles in there, or just that they had Soviet influence there?

O: It was the Soviet influence. I now withdraw that because I guess we really didn't know that there were missile there but we knew there was a potential for it there.

B: Were you introduced as being a person from the CIA?

O: No, I was introduced as being an associate of Bob Maheu-who worked for Bob Maheu.

B: And what name did you use?

O: At that time I used my true name, O'Connell.

B: When you met with Roselli for the first time?

O: Right.

B: All right, then what happened?

O: Well, he eventually decided he would try to help us but he made it quite clear, if it was in the interest of national security and so forth, that he would do it. He didn't want to do it for any compensation - he never did take any money, paid his own way, not only his hotel fees, but he also paid for his air flights and so forth and so on. I don't think that I was fooling him, I think he knew who I was.

B: You mean by that that you were a CIA agent?

O: That's right.

B: Did you ever mention any particular sum involved that might be paid?

O: Yes, we said that this syndicate, these groups, were willing to pay I think it was a \$100,000.

B: It was a figure that you think right now was a \$100,000?

O: I think it was, right.

B: It could have been more - it could have been less?

O: Right.

B: And when you say this syndicate you are referring to the ostensible group of international businesses that supposedly were trying to arrange this? Is that correct?

O: Right.

B: Now, what happened after this conversation?

O: Well, Bob Maheu and I went down to Miami, we met Roselli and he was staying at the time at the Fontainebleau and he said that he would work out some deal where he could get in touch with people in Cuba that could handle the assignment. Bob was being pressed by Hughes and he was sort of commuting back and forth from L.A. to Miami - subsequently I was sort of left with Roselli as sort of his hand-holder and Bob was spending more and more time out in the West Coast. He did get in touch with these people who I didn't know who they were, he said that they were types that had contacts in Cuba and they could handle the assignment. Eventually I did meet a fellow by the name of Sam Gold who I later found out was Sam Giancana. I didn't know it at the time. I met a fellow who was identified as Joe who was considered a claims courier - I found out he was Trafficante who was one of the top Mafia figures and this all came out when we saw their pictures in the Sunday newspaper. Up to that point neither Bob Maheu nor myself knew really who we were dealing with.

B: Now, do you remember about when this first meeting in Miami took place?

O: Well, again, I say if I met Roselli in October which I'm just staking as the starting point in October '60, it was probably sometime in February of '61.

B: Now, at that particular time the Bay of Pigs operation was being planned. Do you know if there was any relationship between what you were doing and the Bay of Pigs operation?

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O: There was absolutely none. As a matter of fact the project handling the Bay of Pigs had absolutely no idea of what was going on as far as we were concerned. We had no relationship with the project down there, it was an entirely separate operation.

B: The only relationship might have been the fact that Bissell knew what you were doing and Bissell was involved with the direction of the Bay of Pigs. Apart from that relationship you don't know of any other?

O: There wasn't any other. Of course, Colonel King, who was the W.H. Division Chief, naturally was involved with the Bay of Pigs project and he knew about this, but that's where we were cut off.

B: I believe you said that the knowledge of this particular project at the time you were involved was kept to a very few people, is that correct?

O: That's correct.

B: Who knew besides you and Colonel Edwards?

O: Well, starting from the top I assume, I only can assume, that Mr. Dulles and certainly Mr. Bissell because I sat in Mr. Bissell's office when we discussed it so at a later time, not at the inception of it but I, at one point, we had sort of a reporting situation where we brought him up to date on it. J.C. King - Colonel J. C. King, W. H. Division, the Chief of T.S.D. who I think at the time was probably one of the Roosevelts, either Corney or Archie, I don't know which one, the people in T.S.D. at the lower echelon as far as I know were never officially briefed on it. There was a Dr. [redacted] and a Dr. Gunn, but I don't - they may have known what was going on but they were not as far as I know ever officially briefed.

B: Gunn is G-U-N-N and [redacted] I believe, is that correct?

O: Right.

B: Did Banneman Edwards' assistant know at the time?

O: No.

B: Now, you mentioned T.S.D. how did they get involved?

O: Well, they got involved in the determining whether they could come up with some sort of esoteric materials to take care of the assignment.

B: This was rather than using a gun, is that correct?

O: Well the, I guess this was discussed beyond me. I don't know. I think they thought that they'd use something a little bit more exotic than just having an out-and-out shoot-out. I don't know who made that decision.

B: Well, to the best of your knowledge were pills developed inside the Technical Services Division?

O: Yes.

B: And these were pills designed to poison and kill someone?

O: That's right.

B: Do you know what kind of pills they were? The technical names that were used for them?

O: No. All I know is that it had a very lethal amount of botulism.

B: And the pills were supposedly going to dissolve in liquid.

O: That's right.

B: Now, did you ever obtain any of these pills?

O: Yes.

B: And when you got them to whom did you give them?

O: To Roselli.

B: Do you know approximately whether this took place in 1960 or 1961?

O: Again, I'd say it was probably '61 because I have to go back to the, and if I'm wrong on the starting date, then I'm going to be wrong on all of my dates. I would say it was October '60 that I first met Roselli so it would have to be '61.

B: You said it would have to be in 1961, is that correct?

O: I say if my starting figure is October '60.

B: Right, now approximately how many pills did you turn over, if you remember?

O: I know - it probably was either three or four.

B: And where did you get the pills?

O: They were delivered to me in Colonel Edwards' office by .

B: Was Colonel Edwards there?

O: Yes.

(End of tape 2, begin tape 3)

B: When you got the pills in Colonel Edwards office, then what did you do with them?

O: Well, I don't know exactly how it came about but I eventually gave them to Roselli.

B: And do you know to whom Roselli gave them?

O: Well, again, I'm a little vague on the sequence, but I think he eventually turned them over to Sam Gold as we knew him who in turn turned them over to Juan Orta but I don't know whether anything in that chain whether Sam got it directly from Roselli or there was some intermediate person there or what the sequence was I don't know.

B: Juan Orta was a person inside Cuba.

O: As far as I know, yeah.

B: You never had any personal knowledge that the pills actually got there?

O: NO.

B: It was hearsay so far as you were concerned?

O: That's right.

B: Did anyone tell you the pills were there?

O: Roselli said that they were delivered into Cuba but I'm only taking his word.

B: And Orta was the person that supposedly had access to Castro?

O: That was my understanding.

B: Then what happened to the best of your knowledge?

O: Well, things dragged on a bit. I returned to Washington and then we got the word that Orta got cold feet. He didn't want to get involved. The pills apparently were returned to Gold, back to Roselli and to the best of my knowledge I brought them back to Washington and they were kept in the Agency until they worked up another deal with Tony Verona.

B: When you say they worked up another deal, who do you mean by they?

O: Roselli and his people down there.

B: And what was the substance of the deal with Tony Verona?

O: Well, Tony Verona was one of the leaders of the Junta who became apparently discouraged with the way the Agency was handling their operations down there.

B: Was Verona an exile of Cuba?

O: Yes and he...

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- B: He lived in the Miami area?
- O: He lived in Miami and he became disenchanted with- apparently became impatient with the way the Agency was handling things and the word was out that he wanted to start his own little show, and how they knew that I don't know, but they did and so they approached Verona and asked if he would take on the assignment, which he did with certain stipulations. He wanted \$10,000 worth of gear and an amount of money, which I think could vary between \$50 and \$100,000, I really don't know. There was money involved upon delivery of the assignment.
- B: Did you assist in getting the gear?
- O: Yes, we went down - we had a man from our Commo Division who really didn't know what he was buying or what was involved but I had to use him as an expert not knowing too much about the Commo gear and we were told specifically what Verona wanted so we had a shopping list and we went down and this Commo man bought the equipment.
- B: By Commo, you mean communications?
- O: Communications, right.
- B: And, that equipment was turned over to Verona?
- O: That was delivered to Verona.
- B: Who delivered it?
- O: Seems to me that, now here's where I get real big. I'm not so sure that this wasn't at the time that I was turning this whole project over to Bill Harvey...
- B: Pardon me, go ahead.
- O: Because I remember one of the last things I was involved in was turning over some equipment. Roselli and I delivered the material.
- B: By material, you mean the pills?

Jac

O: No.

B: The equipment?

O: And I think that was probably the last act I was involved in.

B: When did you turn the project over to Bill Harvey, if you remember?

O: It would be April of '62, that I can pinpoint that.

* B: Now with regard to Verona, did you turn the pills over to Verona too?

O: No. As far as I know, I didn't.

B: Well, you mentioned in our interview that there was then going to be a chef who was going to put the pills in Castro's beverages at a restaurant?

O: Yes, well that was before Harvey got involved as I recall. We brought back the pills the second time. This should be somewhere in here, we're getting a little beyond our story at this point.

B: Well, let me go back - the first stage was to deliver some pills to Juan Orta who supposedly had access to Castro, is that correct?

O: That's right.

B: And then Orta either lost the access or in your phrase "got cold feet" and the pills were delivered back?

O: Right.

B: Then were they redelivered again?

O: They were redelivered again because they had this new asset or somebody that had access to the kitchen where Castro used to frequent - the restaurant.

B: By access supposedly a chef or someone.

O: A chef, yes, I would assume.

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* Please refer to the attached memorandum dated 20 June 1975.

B: You don't know whether it was a chef or waiter or waitress?

O: I can't be sure.

B: And, then what happened so far as the delivery of the pills the second time?

O: This again I'm very vague, I have a recollection and I may be wrong. I think we got the pills back again and I think when I left the pills were back at headquarters.

B: So, what happened is that either the person didn't have access in the restaurant or if the person did have access Castro stopped frequenting the restaurant I assume it was one of those two possibilities.

O: I don't know.

B: You don't know whether it was either one of those? Well, the pills eventually got back and some time after they got back and you aren't quite sure of these dates, but you do know that eventually you turned the whole matter over to Bill Harvey, is that correct?

O: In April of '62, that is something I can say with quite a bit of positiveness.

B: And then Bill Harvey became Roselli's case officer, is that correct?

O: Right.

B: Now, do you believe that before you turned the matter over to Harvey that Roselli knew that you were a CIA employee?

O: He told me he knew. I never admitted it, but he knew. He told me so.

B: I think you said he referred to you as "Big Jim?"

O: That's right.

B: And that at times he introduced you not under your correct name, is that correct?

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O: When he introduced me to his friends the name Olds was used.

B: By his friends do you mean Sam...

O: Sam and Trafficante and -I only met them on two occasions.

B: Do you know where that was?

O: Yes, first time I met them was in a clothing store which obviously was one of their headquarters. It was down on Miami Beach. I don't know what street it was but it was a sort of an arcade type thing and he wanted to buy me a shirt. He said I looked a little seedy which, of course as government employees, you know, sometimes you don't dress that well. But, anyway, he insisted on buying me a shirt but we went into this place, which I thought was just walking off the street, and in there we met all his friends. They had a big office in the back. But I couldn't tell you what street it was or where it was. It was in Miami Beach.

B: Would this have been in the first part of '61?

O: I don't know.

B: It was during the winter of 1960-61?

O: Probably.

B: When was the second time you met the people?

O: I met them at the Fontainebleau, Bob Maheu, and Johnnie and I went to dinner there one night and we ran into Sam - Sam Gold (Giancanno). It was just a shake-hand type of thing. We didn't spend much time with them. That's the only two times I've ever met the man.

B: Do you know when that second occasion was, approximately?

O: No.

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- B: Was it before or after the delivery of the pills to Roselli?
- O: I don't know. I really don't.
- B: How did you find out Sam Gold was Giancanno?
- O: Well, as I explained the first time we knew that was when we saw his picture in the supplement of Parade, it was a Sunday supplement in the Miami newspaper and they had the ten most wanted men on the Attorney General's list and we saw Trafficante and Giancanno's picture. I was in one hotel...
- B: Go ahead, we have another 30 seconds on this tape.
- O: I was in one hotel, Bob Maheu was in the other - he spotted it before I did. He called me and said, do you know who we're dealing with? And that's the first time we knew.
- B: Do you think that's the first time Maheu knew also?
- O: Absolutely.
- (end of tape 3, begin tape 4)
- B: Now Mr. O'Connell, were there any other attempts to assassinate Castro that you know of other than these involving the delivery of the pills?
- O: Not to my knowledge. No.
- B: Were there any other attempts to assassinate anyone else that you know of?
- O: I don't know of any other.
- B: To your own personal knowledge, did you have any information as to whether or not any people outside of the Agency, such as people in the White House, knew of this project while it was going on?
- O: As far as I know, I have no information along that line.
- B: Now, we also discussed prior to this recording of the interview an incident that happened out of Las Vegas concerning Sam Gold and a wiretap. Would you please relate that to the best of your information or recollection?

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- O: Yeah. Bob got a call from Sam saying that he was disturbed from reports he was getting from Las Vegas that his girlfriend, who is Phyliss McGuire, was having an affair with Dan Rowan, who they were both entertaining apparently in the night clubs there. And he was going to go back to Las Vegas to straighten this thing out to his satisfaction. This would have interuppted the project at a very critical time and the only alternative was if Bob would run a tap on Rowan's room to determine what was going on. I say Rowan's room, it may have been McGuire's room, I'm not sure one way or another. But in any event this was one of the conditions that he would stay on and continue on the project. Maheu told him that he did not have the facilities or the assets to do such a thing but when Gold said that he was going to leave, Bob agreed to get somebody to do the job and he got a former friend, or an FBI-former FBI man that he knew in Miami to send a crew out and they did, in effect, instead of bugging the room they bugged the telephone, which was not what they were supposed to do and they eventually were caught.
- B: Now this resulted in some disclosures that had to be made to the FBI or Department of Justice as I understand it, is that correct?
- O: As I understand it, that is correct. It occurred while I was out of the country.
- B: You mean the meeting with the Attorney General?
- O: That's right.
- B: Do you know whether or not the request for help from Sam Gold came at a time that you were in the process of trying to get the pills delivered over there to Cuba?
- O: Well, it certainly must of been because as I recall it was a critical time and so I can just put things together. I assume that that was when we were trying to do it.
- B: And so basically again you stated you aren't quite sure of dates but if your original date of October 1960 of your first conversations with Roselli are correct, this would have placed the Sam Gold incident sometime in the first part of 1961, so far as the Phyliss McGuire bugging, is that correct?

- O: I could have been, I couldn't be sure. It could have been later than that.
- B: Okay. Now, I've asked you whether or not you know of any CIA files on this matter and I wish you would respond to that for the record.
- O: Well, as I mentioned to you it was a very closely held project. There was nothing as far as formal files were concerned. I did periodically write memoranda for the record. I don't know where they are now. They were at one time kept in Howard Osborn's office. I assume they're still there or maybe they've been destroyed. I don't know, I have no access to them.
- B: Any other facts that you might want to add that you think might in any way be relevant to our inquiries here?
- O: I don't have any.
- B: Any other facts which relate in any manner whatsoever to any alleged assassination plots against Castro?
- O: No, this is the only - as I say, I was assigned as case officer to Bob Maheu. I got my instructions and I contacted Bob and my involvement was as I stated right now, that's about it.
- B: Mr. O'Connell, John McCone took over the position as Director of Central Intelligence in late 1961, do you have any knowledge as to whether or not he was ever briefed about this project?
- O: I don't - his name never came up. All I know is that Mr. Dulles was aware of it. Mr. McCone's name never came up.
- B: You went over to the Far East in June of 1962, when did you come back to the country then?
- O: I came back in July of 1965.
- B: Do you hear any information as to what took place with the project after you turned Roselli over to Harvey?

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- O: I never have, I don't think I ever met Harvey or saw Harvey from the time I turned Roselli over. I did see Roselli once. We had a social luncheon but nothing was ever discussed. I have no idea what transpired after I left.
- B: When was that social luncheon, approximately, if you remember?
- O: Probably sometime in 1966.
- B: Anything else you can think of that might in any way be relevant to the inquiries of this Commission?
- O: I don't have anything.
- B: Now, I have one more question, Mr. O'Connell. You indicated that you knew the people that you might be dealing with, at least Roselli and subsequently Sam Gold, might be what you called in an interview "tough guys" or "Mobsters" but when you first met them did you know that they were involved with the Mafia.
- O: No, we had no idea. Maybe we should have but we, neither Bob Maheu or myself were aware that they were in the Mafia and that came out eventually by seeing their pictures in the Parade supplement in a Miami newspaper and that's the first time we knew we were dealing with Sam Giancanno and a fellow, I forget his first name, Trafficante who we knew under a different name.
- B: And, after you knew that these people were Mafia people, did that change your plans at all?
- O: Well, at that point it was sort of beyond doing anything we could change. We were into this thing so deeply we figured we may as well go along but we were both a little bit, quite a bit, surprised that who we were dealing with.
- B: Anything else that you wish to add?
- O: No.
- B: Thank you very much for coming sir.