

NEW YORK

The Reles Mystery

During the Senate Crime (Kefauver) Committee's spectacular hearings in New York City last winter these exchanges took place between Senator Charles W. Tobey of New Hampshire and William O'Dwyer, former Brooklyn District Attorney and Mayor of New York:

SENATOR TOBEY: Mr. Witness, when did the Anastasia case, which you [called] a perfect case * * * become an imperfect case, and how?

MR. O'DWYER: When Reles died.

SENATOR TOBEY: Why did these fellows in the room with Reles throw him out the window to kill him? * * *

MR. O'DWYER: Have you any facts on which to base [that statement], sir?

SENATOR TOBEY: No; only intuition and horse sense.

They were discussing a key issue in the ten-year-old story of Murder, Inc., the national crime ring which Mr. O'Dwyer prosecuted while District Attorney. Abe Reles was a Murder, Inc., thug who turned state's evidence and helped send seven of his former cronies to the electric chair. On Nov. 12, 1941, he fell to his death from a sixth-floor room in the Hall Moon Hotel, Coney Island, where he was under police guard. Two sheets knotted together hung from the window; the guards, outside the door, said they had heard nothing.

O'Dwyer's Theory

The theory of Mr. O'Dwyer and the police was that Reles had slipped while trying to escape. Mr. O'Dwyer told the Kefauver Committee that Reles' death destroyed a murder case against the chief executioner of Murder, Inc., Anthony Anastasia. His reason was that New York State law requires, for a murder conviction, testimony of at least one person who was not a co-conspirator in the murder. According to Mr. O'Dwyer, Reles knew about but was not involved in one murder ordered by Anastasia and could therefore qualify as a non-conspirator witness. There were other witnesses, but they either were conspirators or could not actually connect Anastasia with the crime.

In the Kefauver hearings there were charges, by Senator Tobey and others, first that gangsters or bribed police might have killed Reles to silence him, and second, that Mr. O'Dwyer could and should have prosecuted Anastasia even with Reles dead. Last September a Brooklyn grand jury reopened the Reles case to look into the charges.

The grand jury brought in its findings last Friday. It concluded that Reles had, in fact, fallen to his death while attempting escape. But the jury disagreed with Mr. O'Dwyer's contention that Reles' death had ruined his case against Anastasia. It held Reles had been a conspirator in the Anastasia murder case and therefore was "not even an essential witness." The grand jury did not indicate what, if any, other witnesses or evidence Mr. O'Dwyer could have used to prosecute Anastasia.