

Fifteen seconds of terror

The sick little
bricklayer pumped five
bullets into
the stunned crowd.
Five people fell.
But not the intended
victim: FDR!

by Bob Crossland

AT 9:35 P.M. on February 15, 1933, the destiny of America hung in the balance for 15 seconds. An assassin with a cheap revolver, a wobbly chair, a doctor's wife and the next President of the U.S. figured in one of the most frightening dramas of the 20th century.

The setting was Bayfront Park in downtown Miami, Florida. Had just one of Giuseppe Zangara's five bullets found its intended mark, Franklin Delano Roosevelt might have died less than a month before he started the first of his epochal four terms in the White House.

As a working newspaper reporter, I was standing less than ten feet from the automobile in which

Roosevelt was sitting. While FDR escaped unscathed, those 15 seconds of terror saw Mayor Anton J. Cermak of Chicago crumple almost at my feet with a bullet in his right lung, and Mrs. Joseph Gill, wife of the president of the Florida Power & Light Co., fall with a bullet in her abdomen. Russell Caldwell, a Coral Gables architect, dropped with a head wound, as did Miss Margaret Krus, a New Jersey dancer. She slumped to the ground beside Mayor Cermak. And William Sinnott, a New York detective on vacation, was shot in the head.

The curtain of the drama went up when Miami headlines announced that President-elect Roosevelt had ended his 11-day fishing trip aboard Vincent Astor's yacht, the *Nourmahal*, and would make a brief speech in Miami before leaving by train for Washington to prepare for his inauguration on March 4.

In a cheap rooming house in downtown Miami, Giuseppe Zangara, a pint-sized Italian immigrant, lay on a sway-backed iron bed and laboriously read the newspaper, which carried a map of FDR's route. Leaving the rooming house, he went to a pawnshop where he purchased an \$8 mail-order revolver and ten cartridges. Then he hurried toward Bayfront Park.

Zangara stood in one of the aisles, about 15 feet behind the first row in front of the bandstand. Crippled by polio, Roosevelt had elected to speak from the back seat of an open automobile. Meanwhile, nearly 500 no-

tables, including Mayor Cermak, took their seats on the stage, about 50 feet behind the spot marked for FDR's car. Every seat in the park was filled and thousands were standing behind the last row of seats.

The auto carrying Roosevelt drove into the park, flanked by Secret Service men, Miami police, sheriff's deputies and an honor guard of American Legionnaires.

The President-elect's speech was brief. When he finished, the celebrities broke from the stage and started toward the car. George Brodnax, Secret Service agent in charge of security arrangements, waved to the driver of the auto to get going, but Roosevelt stayed the order. He had recognized Mayor Cermak and called him over. The Chicago Mayor stepped upon the car's running board and shook the President-elect's hand. They chatted for a few moments.

Suddenly, Zangara stood up on a vacated chair and started shooting. A 105-pound Miami doctor's wife sitting in front of him screamed and grabbed his wrist, trying to get the gun away from him. She managed to divert his aim, but was unable to shake him from the chair. Zangara emptied the revolver in less than 15 seconds.

Instantly, a flying wedge of Legionnaires buried the gunman and a dozen spectators beneath a pile of humanity, while a Secret Service man and two Miami officials lifted

the wounded Mayor Cermak and dragged him toward the Presidential car. Brodnax shouted for the driver of the car to get out of the park, but again FDR countermanded the order. He was unwilling to go until Cermak had been placed in the back seat. Only then would Roosevelt give the order to leave for the hospital. He cradled Cermak's head in his lap as they sped away.

Meanwhile, Zangara had been brought to bay. Shouts of "Kill him! Lynch him!" were going up from all sides, and many women tried to claw the assassin as he was dragged to a sheriff's car and hastily taken from the park.

At the county jail, authorities got their first good look at the man who had tried to assassinate Franklin D. Roosevelt. He said his name was Giuseppe Zangara and that he was 32 years old. Only five feet, one inch tall, he had a tremendous head of black, bushy hair. The only reason he could give for his act—then or afterward—was that he hated capitalists and suffered almost continually from stomach pains. (Doctors later said these pains were probably emotional in origin.)

Zangara said he had come to Miami from Hackensack, New Jersey, where he was employed as a bricklayer. About ten years earlier, he had resolved to assassinate King Victor Emmanuel of Italy, but decided not to because of the dense crowds and the presence of royal



Dwarfed by Miami police, sullen Zangara faced photographers wearing only a towel. Angry mob manhandled him after his assassination attempt failed.

guards. Zangara had intended to go north to shoot President Hoover when he read of FDR's visit. He changed his mind again, foregoing Hoover because FDR was close by.

In the meantime, at Jackson Memorial Hospital, Mayor Cermak and Mrs. Gill, the most seriously injured of the bystanders, were rushed into surgery. Roosevelt refused to leave the hospital, maintaining a vigil in the operating room corridor until Cermak and Mrs. Gill had been taken to private rooms.

Little time was lost in arraigning Zangara on four counts of attempted murder. Still defiant, he refused counsel, but three attorneys were appointed by the court to defend him. He only sneered when he was sentenced to 20 years in prison on each of the four counts.

"Don't be stingy, give me more—give me 100 years!" he snarled at the judge as he was led away.


Then, after less than a month-long fight for life, Mayor Cermak died. (Mrs. Gill hung between life and death for weeks, but eventually recovered.) Thus Zangara once

more faced the court, this time on a murder charge. On March 10, he was sentenced to die in the electric chair for the slaying of Chicago's Mayor Cermak.

The sentence was carried out on March 20, 1933 at the state prison at Raiford, Florida. Zangara preceded the guards into the execution chamber. He ran over to the chaplain and handed him a sheaf of papers—his autobiography. As the guards approached him, Zangara said, "Keep hands off. I not afraid to sit in chair. I do it myself."

With that, he walked over and sat down in the electric chair and waited for the attendants to attach the electrodes.

Shading his eyes, he looked around, apparently for photographers. Not finding any, he shook his fist angrily and shouted, "You no take my picture? You lousy bums."

As attendants were adjusting the black cowl and the electrodes, Zangara became impatient. "Push the button, push the button!" were his last words as the fatal charge of electricity surged through his body. 

Coronet

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