

# Mafia driver's death unnoticed in Cuba

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HAVANA --

The man who was Meyer Lansky's driver and bodyguard during the Mafia's heyday in pre-Revolutionary Cuba died earlier this year, a curious footnote in a communist-run country whose past as a gambling mecca for vacationing Americans is all but forgotten.

There was no story in the Communist Party daily Granma about the Feb. 12 death of Armando Jaime Casielles, at age 75, from lung cancer. No mention on Cuban state television either, despite the decades he spent promoting Afro-Cuban dance and music in his post-Mafia years.

Casielles' close friend, Enrique Cirules, got the news through word of mouth.

"He liked his cigars, he liked his whiskey, never stopped working," Cirules told The Associated Press. "He was a very respected man."

A stout, reserved man who sported eyeglasses, a goatee and a pinky ring, Casielles was among the last people alive with firsthand knowledge of Mafia operations in the colorful, decadent Havana that thrived before a young rebel named Fidel Castro seized power.

Stoic and discreet, Casielles was there with Lansky during numerous meetings with Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, who protected gambling businesses on the island, and accompanied him when the mobster traveled around the Caribbean to talk with underworld figures such as Santos Trafficante Sr.

Casielles helped Lansky hide in the Cuban capital in late 1957 after the Sicilian Mafia families of New York tried to grab control of the mobster's Havana operation, and violence erupted in Manhattan.

And he was behind the wheel of Lansky's silver-gray 1957 Chevrolet Impala convertible on New Year's Eve 1958. As word spread that Batista had fled the island and Castro's bearded rebels were close to victory, he helped the gangster scoop up millions of dollars in profits from his Havana casinos.

The next day, Cuban mobs euphoric over the revolutionary triumph ransacked the gambling dens, exposing their deep resentment of Mafia control of the island. Bonfires of smashed slot machines and roulette tables raged in Havana's streets.

Soon thereafter, the revolutionary government outlawed gambling, prostitution and nonprescription drugs, and the mobsters gave up without a fight.

"The gigantic projects of gaming, drugs and sex; channels of heroin to the United States, and cocaine powder for the consumption of thousands of American tourists who visited the wildest spots in Havana ... were condemned to disappear as soon as Batista's tyranny fell apart," Cirules wrote in "The Secret Life of Meyer Lansky in Havana."

Available only in Cuba in Spanish, it sold out when it was published in 2004 and is now in its second edition.

The book also revealed the secret life Casielles led before undergoing what he described as a moral conversion, rejecting his Mafia past and becoming the public relations director of the Conjunto Folklorico Nacional dance troupe for more than three decades.

Born in Havana in 1931, Casielles left the island in 1948 to study public relations at Northwestern University, perfecting his English. He was a card dealer in a Las Vegas casino when Lansky persuaded him to be his assistant in Cuba.

As Cirules researched his book, the two men spent countless afternoons visiting Lansky's haunts: the former military base where Lansky and Batista met, the Marina Hemingway where Lansky took his mistress Carmen; the hotels where raucous Americans arriving on 80 daily flights from the United States once crowded around roulette wheels and blackjack tables.

The Capri, the Rivera, the Deauville, and the Nacional hotels still stand today, destinations for beach-seeking Europeans on travel packages and the rare American congressmen on trade and fact-finding missions.

"I began to discover a Havana that I never knew existed," said the 68-year-old Cirules, who grew up in eastern Camaguey and didn't arrive in Havana until long after the revolution.

Casielles described how Lansky left Cuba for good with a fake passport in April 1959. Carmen accompanied him to the United States, where he died in 1983, 12 years after he was indicted for allegedly skimming millions of dollars from the Flamingo hotel-casino in Las Vegas. The charges were dismissed because of his poor health.

The millions of dollars they collected that New Year's Eve had already been spirited out.

"You're coming with me," Casielles recalled Lansky telling him.

"I told him no."

"Well," replied Lansky, "you know what you're doing."

Casielles underwent a "spiritual, ethical and moral crisis" about the harm organized crime had caused Cuba, Cirules said.

"This was the reality of many Cubans at that time," agreed longtime friend Gregorio Hernandez, a musician and dancer. "Jaime became a super revolutionary, an admirer of Fidel Castro and his work."

Casielles later became interested in Cuba's African-influenced music, helping the dance troupe launch projects such as Havana's popular Sabados de la Rumba, which brings families together to enjoy traditional music each weekend. He also married twice, and had three children: a son and daughter now in Venezuela, and a daughter in Havana.

Casielles didn't hide his years with Lansky from others in Castro's Cuba, but "his life after that was so different," said Hernandez. "He left behind a life of wealth and shared all these difficult years with us."

It was not the former Mafia driver Cubans mourned when Casilles died, but a revolutionary who delighted in promoting his country's traditional culture. That's the man Hernandez sang his farewell rumba to at the memorial service, fulfilling a last promise to a good friend: "When one loses a brother, what sadness! What pain is left in the soul!"