

They say career advancement is all about networking – meeting the right people and making the right choices. And the people with whom we associate will partly define our professional standing. But one US optician made some very bad career choices indeed. So bad, that the consequences were to prove fatal to him one morning in February 1929.

In his business advertisements Reinhart Schwimmer styled himself 'Dr R Schwimmer, optometrist and eyesight specialist' even though he apparently had little or no medical training. His practice was at 625 North Avenue, Chicago, opening hours supposedly 10am-8pm. In fact he was an inveterate gambler, running up large debts; and he spent more time at the racetrack than at his work, causing his practice to founder. His gambling also brought him into contact with the more unsavoury types in Chicago society, and so began his fascination with that city's Prohibition-era gangsters.

Pretend gangster

Schwimmer was never a gangster himself but liked to hang out with members of George 'Bugs' Moran's North Side Irish gang for the thrill of being associated with those characters. He liked to boast to his friends that he was in the illicit booze business, spinning them tall tales of importing alcohol from Detroit, and would claim that, with his connections, he could have anyone 'whacked' should he wish it. These fantasies, and his gambling, also contributed to a convoluted private life.

Reinhart Schwimmer's birthdate is usually given as December 1 1900 (the date shown on his headstone), although his birth certificate says 1899. His first name is normally spelt 'Reinhardt' but is engraved without the 'd' on the headstone. He was certainly born in Chicago and married Fae Johnson, whom he divorced in 1923. He then moved into the Parkway Apartments but, when his debts accumulated, he was asked to leave. Having found a rich widow, Mrs Risch, to marry, he was able to move back into the Parkway on the understanding that his gangland associations were finished. When she divorced him in 1927-8, he went back to spending his days with his North Side friends.

Schwimmer might have stayed on the periphery of gangland

A fatal connection

David Baker finds an optical connection to the infamous St Valentine's Day massacre



A wax figure reconstruction of the St Valentine's Day massacre in 1929

violence were it not for his penchant for emulating the dress style and appearance of his hero, 'Bugs' Moran. One of Moran's main rivals for business was the South Side Italian gang, led by a certain Al Capone. Capone was mad at Moran for the North Side's frequent hijacking of his Canadian alcohol en route to Chicago, as well as for their execution of South Side gang members. On Capone's orders, a plan was devised to lure Moran to the North Side's hang-out, where Jack 'Machine Gun' McGurn would carry out the hit.

The commonly held theory is that Moran was to expect a delivery of cut-price whiskey to the North Side headquarters, the SMC Cartage warehouse at 2122 North Clark Street at 11am on 14 February.

Schwimmer wanted to come along for the ride, and accompanied gangsters Frank and Pete Gusenberg, James Clerk, Adam Heyer and Al Weinshank to the warehouse, where gang mechanic John May was working on a car. Moran was to meet them there. At 10.30am, tipped off by lookouts who may have mistaken Schwimmer for Moran, a police car pulled up outside the warehouse. Four men emerged, two in police uniform, and entered the building. The 'policemen' frisked, disarmed and lined Moran's men up against a wall. The gangsters were unconcerned with this as they were well used to a police

rousting and assumed that, if arrested, their connections would soon gain them their release. Schwimmer was probably looking forward to having his name in the newspaper reports as vindication of his bona fide gangland connections.

The fake officers now signalled to their plain-clothed accomplices to enter the room with their Thompson sub-machine guns which they proceeded to fire at the seven men, spraying them with 70 bullets. Only Frank Gusenberg, despite 14 bullet wounds, was not killed outright, although he died three hours later still claiming, 'Nobody shot me'. The two 'policemen' made a show of escorting the killers from the building as if under arrest and escaped in the police car. The hit was a failure in that Capone didn't get Moran: some say he was simply late showing up, others that he saw the police car and coolly drove on.

So ended what became known as the St Valentine's Day Massacre. But the unfortunate fantasist and sometime optician Schwimmer would surely have approved of the Chicago Police Department's homicide record's description of him as 'One of the seven Moran gangsters...' ●

My thanks to optometrist Seth Belson for his assistance with this article.

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