

Assassin's Assassin Was Copyright Registrant — and Infringer

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Did you know that Jack Ruby registered a copyright? Frank Evina, known as the Copyright Office's unofficial historian until his 2007 retirement, called to ask that question last month. He said the 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's November 22, 1963, assassination reminded him of the Ruby copyright.

Evina learned about it from former Register of Copyrights Barbara Ringer. She told him "some time in the 1970s" that the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, known informally as the Warren Commission, had asked federal agencies to search their files for any information related to Lee Harvey Oswald, who assassinated President Kennedy, or Jack Ruby, who shot and killed Oswald. The Warren Commission investigated Kennedy's assassination in 1963 and 1964, publishing an 889-page report.

A search of copyright records turned up nothing on Oswald but identified a registration filed by Jack Rubenstein on January 16, 1942, for a color print titled "Remember Pearl Harbor." The registration, numbered 49571, fell under "class K," the category used at the time for prints and pictorial illustrations. The catalog card for the registration notes that Rubenstein was "doing business as Liberty Distributing Co.," located in Chicago.

A biography of Jack Ruby in the Warren Commission's report notes that Ruby was born in Chicago in 1911 and named Jacob Rubenstein by his parents, immigrants from Poland. He changed his name to Jack Ruby in 1947.

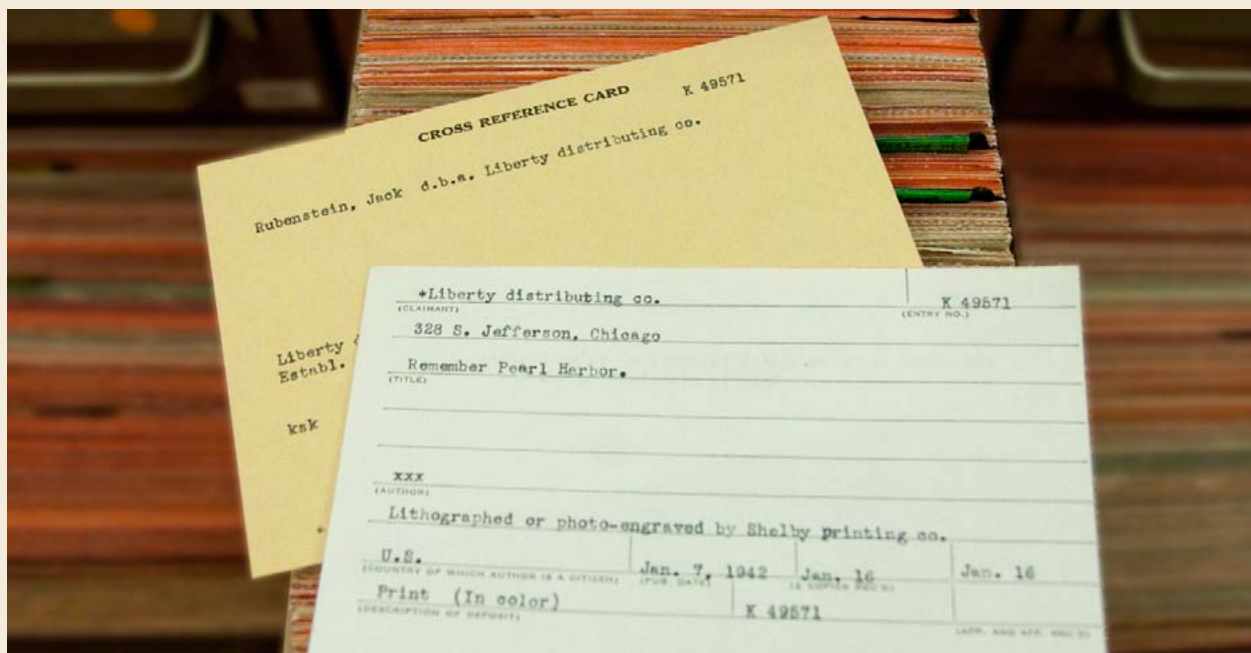
As a young man, Ruby engaged in assorted commercial ventures to support himself. In 1941, he and a friend established a small firm to sell novelty items. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of that year, they decided to sell plaques commemorating the "Day of Infamy." The art Ruby registered in 1942 was for the plaque.

An earlier experience may have alerted Ruby to the benefits of copyright registration. For the Warren Commission inquiry, Bell P. Herndon, special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, interrogated Ruby on July 18, 1964, about Ruby's life before the Kennedy

assassination. "Have you ever served time in jail?" Herndon asked. Ruby admitted to serving 30 days for unauthorized sale of copyrighted sheet music "back in the old depression days" in Chicago.

"That 30 days embarrasses me," Ruby testified. "It was something that I didn't realize at the time there were copyrights on those songs." He added that he "made a pretty good living at that time."

Records indicate that the art deposited for Ruby's 1942 registration is no longer part of the Office's holdings. ©



Copyright catalog cards with details about Ruby's registration