

EXPLOITATION IN GONE-BY TIMES STILL AS REPUGNANT

CESAR, the owner, had just poured me a rum and Coke. I was listening to the woes of a young correction officer at the bar when the stranger walked up. "I been wanting to talk to you for a long time," the short, middle-aged man said. "I'm the first Puerto Rican in New York to face the electric chair for killing a white boy."

This was last week at the Glenroy Tavern, E. 149th St., across the street from Hostos College, about as deep into the heart and mind of the South Bronx as you can get.

Where else, except Cesar's place, can you find oldheads and college kids, cops and ex-cons and lawyers and ex-junkies in the same spot?

"Frank Santana's my name," the man said.

"You came before Cape Man or the Umbrella Man?" I asked.

"Shoot. I was upstate four years when Cape Man got there. I was only 17. Look it up."

"Tell me more," I said, gulping down my Cuba Libre.

"The doctor used me. Exploitation, that's what it was. *Hermano*, this was worse than Amy Fisher or Katie Beers," he said. "The guy wrote my life story without my permission — and I never got a dime."

Santana proceeded to tell his tale, right out of "West Side Story." He and Cape Man and a handful of other Puerto Ricans jailed in the '50s for gang killings were the inspiration for Leonard Bernstein's classic musical about New York's ethnic strife.

Santana was one of the shocking crimes of 1955.

"GANGSTER, 17, ADMITS SLAYING MODEL BOY, 15" blared the Daily News' front page on May 2 of that year.

The initial story had Santana and his gang, the Navahos, confronting two upright whites, William Blankenship, 15, a sophomore football player at Mount St. Michael High School, and Salvatore Siciliano, also 15, as they rode their bikes to a movie.

The Navahos, police said, were looking to rumble with an Italian gang, the Golden Guineas, because the Guineas and Navahos used the same design on their leather jackets. The Puerto Ricans mistook the two white kids for Guineas. Santana — police said his gang name was Tarzan — coolly shot and killed Blankenship, son of a Bronx civic leader.

When they arrested him a few days later, police charged Santana with murder one. The kid was staring at the electric chair.

His attorney, Mark Lane,



Frank Santana, 17, pleaded guilty to second-degree murder in 1955 and served 25 years.



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who would gain greater fame after the Kennedy assassination, got a young liberal psychiatrist, Frederic Wertham, to conduct long interviews with the teenager, his garment-worker mother and other family members in hopes of persuading a jury that Santana was not fully responsible for his actions and deserved mercy.

The case never went to trial. Bronx District Attorney Daniel Sullivan discovered that Santana, who had been described by the media as a "sav- age" gang member, was actual-

ly an introverted, 5-foot-3, slightly built kid who had never been in trouble.

Blankenship turned out not to be a "model boy" but a member of the Red Wings, a gang allied with the Golden Guineas whose specialty was attacking Puerto Ricans.

And at a court hearing, an assistant prosecutor told the judge that the 6-foot Blankenship provoked Santana and had "in some measure contributed to his own tragedy."

Blankenship's father asked the judge for mercy for his son's killer. Santana pleaded

guilty to second-degree murder and was sentenced to 25 years to life. He served the full 25. He entered jail as a boy and walked out in 1980 as a middle-aged man. He has spent the years since working odd jobs, running social clubs and bars, trying to bury a past that will never go away.

While in jail, Santana learned from his mother that Wertham, the psychiatrist who had interviewed him before his conviction, had written a book about his life.

Published in 1956, it was called "The Circle of Guilt." On the front cover are the words: "The sobering facts and hidden causes behind one of this country's most shocking murders."

The book is a complete portrait of Santana, filled with family photos, school records, his private drawings, inter- views with his family. It makes

no attempt to disguise Santana's identity. In fact, Wertham, who died in 1981, quotes freely from newspaper articles about the case.

"He never asked my permission, never told me he was doing that," Santana said. "Now, is that right? That's just like with Amy Fisher, only he was a doctor. He should know better. I was only 17. I may be Puerto Rican, but I got feelings and rights like anybody else."

"Doesn't sound right to me," I said.

"You wait right here," Santana said. "I'm going home to get the book so you can see for yourself. I been waiting for years to show it you."

Behind the bar, Cesar had been listening. As Santana rushed out the door, Cesar started to pour me another rum and Coke.

Some things never change. Katie Beers and Amy Fisher are too young to know that.