

Labor official admits role in thefts of relics

An investigator for the U.S. Department of Labor was recorded making deals to fence stolen architectural items.

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After 25 years as a federal agent, Charles W. Kass knew how criminals got caught.

He knew all about wiretaps, government informants and surveillance videos.

So Kass' voice was likely one of the last that FBI agents expected to hear as they listened to a wire-tapped pay telephone at the busy drug corner of Eighth Street and Allegheny Avenue in Philadelphia.

But it was the voice of the U.S. Department of Labor investigator on the tape from Nov. 21, 1997, not talking about drugs but bartering with a neighborhood burglar over stolen architectural relics.

Yesterday, a prosecutor told a federal judge that the inadvertent tapes of Kass proved that he was acting as a high-volume fence — for more than \$120,000 worth of gates, grates, mantels and other appointments — working for a ring of thieves “robbing poor neighborhoods of their architectural heritage.”

The information surfaced during a hearing at which Kass, 53, pleaded guilty to interstate transportation of stolen property, including the cast-iron gates stolen in 1998 from historic St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Society Hill.

Kass declined to comment after the hearing, at which he admitted conduct that could put him behind bars for 15 to 21 months.

Kass leaned heavily against the lectern during the 50-minute hearing before U.S. District Judge Petrese B. Tucker, heaving periodic

sighs with his one-word responses to the judge's questions about his understanding of his legal rights.

Tucker set sentencing for Feb. 8. Kass, a retired labor-corruption investigator who moved from his South Jersey home to an unidentified Southern state, remains free on bond.

Defense lawyer Jeffrey M. Kolansky called Kass' conduct a “colossal mistake in judgment.” He said that Kass cooperated with authorities after being confronted and that he voluntarily returned the stolen church gates to city police.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Linda Dale Hoffa quoted extensively from transcripts of three wire-tapped phone calls to show, she said, that Kass knew that the items he bought from three North Philadelphia thieves had been stolen from neighborhood buildings.

Hoffa said the wiretaps and the testimony of Anthony Lewis, 34, showed Kass bought stolen items for cash five to six times a week. Lewis was later arrested by Philadelphia police for his role in the thefts and is now on probation.

Hoffa said Kass' checking account showed he made numerous cash deposits and withdrawals: \$393,420 withdrawn between January 1997 and April 1998, including a total of \$111,670 from automated teller machines.

Kass even talked to his suppliers from his office phone at the U.S. Department of Labor Inspector General's Office at Sixth and Chestnut Streets, in the same building as the U.S. Attorney's Office. Hoffa

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