

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.

By Joseph A. Slobodzian
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

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 wiretapped 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. Kolan-sky 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 wiretapped 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

See KASS on B8

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THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

U.S. labor official admits role in thefts

KASS from B1

Said Kass also paid thieves at lunch-time meetings at an ATM at Sixth and Ranstead Streets, behind his office.

The incident that triggered Kass' downfall was the theft of the 200-year-old gates from the back of St. Peter's at Third and Pine Streets in February 1998.

Hoffa said Kass paid \$600 to Darryl Nixon for the gates — valued at \$10,000 — and sold them for

\$1,100 on Feb. 24, 1998, to Fritz Sterbak, owner of an antiques store in Havre de Grace, Md. Nixon was later arrested by Philadelphia police and cooperated with investigators.

Kass told Sterbak he was a retired FBI agent and assured Sterbak he had obtained the gates legally from a demolition contractor, Hoffa said.

But news reports about the theft from the historic church circulat-

ed widely on the East Coast, and a week later, Sterbak heard the news at an antiques auction, Hoffa said.

After driving to Philadelphia to verify that his gates matched the remaining gates at St. Peter's, Sterbak called Kass and told him he had 48 hours to pick up the gates and return them to the church or Sterbak would call police.

Kass retrieved the two 7-foot-tall

wrought-iron gates and was the "unidentified informant" who police said returned the gates to the church on March 4.

Even then, Hoffa said, Kass tried to hide his role, telling police he could not identify the person from whom he bought the gates and not revealing that he had resold them to Sterbak.

Joseph A. Slobodzian's e-mail address is jslobodzian@phillynews.com