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BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

The Great Plane Robbery

Without firing a shot, the masked men escaped from Kennedy Airport in a van with 40 parcels containing jewelry and cash.

By Edward Kosner
Aug. 26, 2015 6:27 pm ET

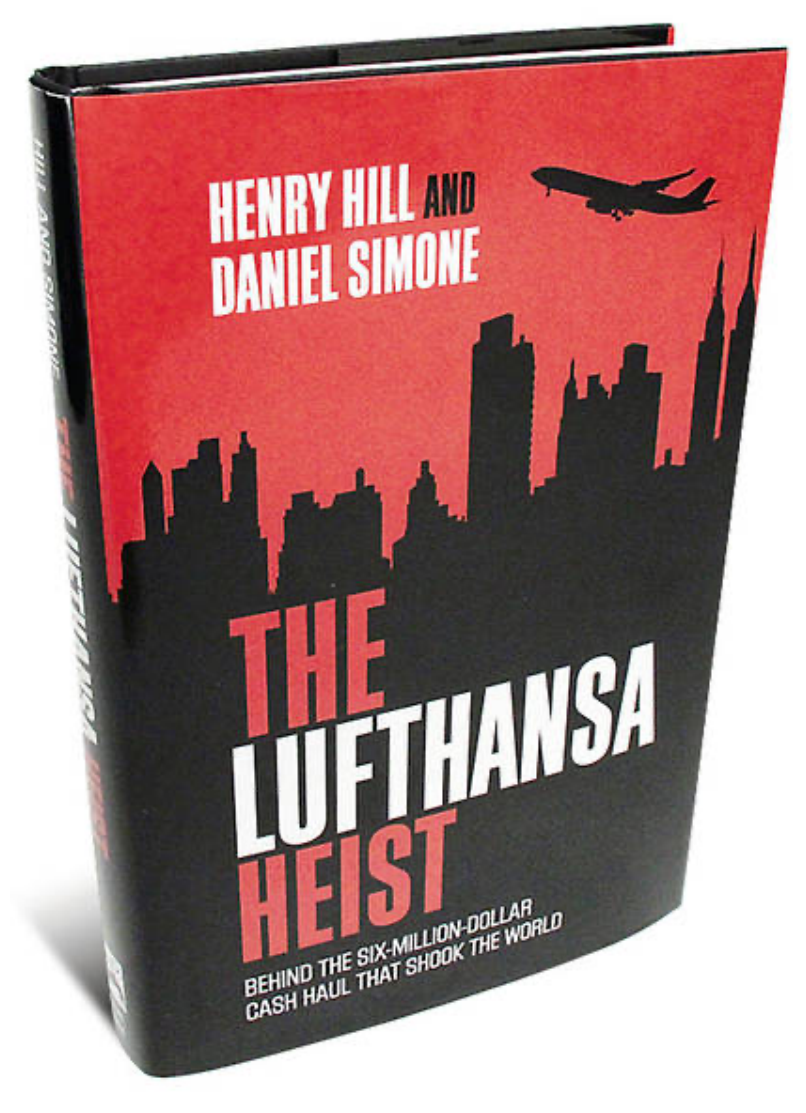
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If there were a Mafia Hall of Fame, Henry Hill would be in it, just barely. No Frank Costello, Meyer Lansky or John Gotti, Hill was a hustling New York mob guy who wound up in the federal witness protection program and became the anti-hero of Martin Scorsese's classic "Goodfellas."

Hill was only half-Italian—his mother was Sicilian, his father Irish—so he was never a made man. But he had his graspy fingers in nearly every racket and was on the inside of the \$6 million Lufthansa heist at Kennedy Airport on Dec. 11, 1978, one of the greatest cash and jewel hauls in American criminal history.

Nick Pileggi told Hill's story brilliantly in "Wiseguy" (1985), the basis for Mr. Scorsese's 1990 movie, in which Hill was played with coke-addled desperation by Ray Liotta. Now in "The Lufthansa Heist," Hill, who died in 2012, rehearses the Lufthansa saga in a new version co-written by Daniel Simone.

The take equaled more than \$21 million today, shy of the fabled 1950 Brink's job, in which a group of armed, masked men liberated \$27 million in today's money from the Brink's security firm's offices in Boston. Neither heist compares with the 1963 Great Train Robbery in England, when a gang of 15 waylaid a Royal Mail train and escaped with the equivalent of roughly \$75 million.



THE LUFTHANSA HEIST
By Henry Hill and Daniel Simone
Lyons, 367 pages, \$26.95

Hill's book comes with testimonials from the FBI men who led the investigation and the last woman Hill lived with. But the problem with this version starts with an "Authors' Note" claiming that "the principal events and facts" in the narrative are true but going on to warn: "In many segments, scenes and dialogues have been re-created with literary technique combined or imagined to plausibly reflect the documentary record." In other words, we've made some of this stuff up, but it's kinda, sorta the way it happened.

Thus alerted, the reader plunges into a narrative so melodramatic and cliché-ridden that he or she might be reading a comic book or watching one of those B-movie crime films like "A Close Call for Boston Blackie" that used to round out double bills when the movies cost a quarter. Hill's collaborator this time around is a kind of anti-Pileggi—a verbose language sadist capable of inflicting sentences like: "Due to her overcharged sexual urges, moments of hot flashes often emblazoned the voluptuous Lina."

At one point, the assistant U.S. attorney handling the Lufthansa robbery contacts the chief FBI agent on the case and tells him, "It behooves us to meet at the earliest and have a reciprocating briefing on the Lufthansa investigation." If you believe two New York gangbusters talk that way to each other, you'll enjoy the rest of the dialogue in "The Lufthansa Heist."

The book offers a detailed narrative of the planning and execution of the airport robbery and of Hill's role as the star witness for the feds. One difficulty is that Hill brought the caper to Burke but did not participate in the robbery. So the scenes of the robbers scheming and in action have a fabricated feel, full of faux authentic detail ("His pulpy lips widened and, teeth missing, his mouth opened to a gaping hole") and canned dialogue. The last third of the book dealing with Hill's cooperation with the feds feels less hokey because he is re-creating a role he actually played.

A small-time politician named John Santucci was the Queens district attorney during the Lufthansa case. He never appears in this book, but a ridiculous caricature named "Francis Tyson" with the nonexistent titles of "borough prosecutor" and "borough attorney" struts through a couple of chapters providing comic relief, if not confidence in the narrative.

Still, there are some entertaining moments. "The Dapper Don," John Gotti, has a few cameos, including one that Hill describes with photographic memory: "That evening, the winner of the fashion show would've been John Gotti. He wore an ash gray single-breasted jacket, a powdery violet tie, and navy blue pleated slacks." Later in the book, Gotti whacks one of the Lufthansa robbers at what the poor guy thought would be his solemn Mafia initiation ceremony.

Another bizarre moment comes when an ambitious Queens junior prosecutor poring over transcripts becomes convinced that "the big Irishman in Albany" mentioned in wiretaps in connection with Hill's sideline heroin dealing must be Hugh Carey, the Democratic governor of New York. He wasn't. When the assistant DA puts the idea to Hill, the mob rat laughs in his face and the prosecutor collapses in flop sweat, his dreams of glory dashed.

The Lufthansa case was resolved by default. Burke couldn't be indicted, because everybody who might testify against him had been murdered, so Hill helped the feds nail Burke on an unrelated killing. He died in prison.

Hill lived to sing another day, as an inspirational speaker to high-school students and other groups. He outlived everybody connected with the great plane robbery, and, like Ishmael, he alone was left to tell the tale. Again and again.

Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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