

The New York Times

Anthony Corallo, Mob Boss, Dies in Federal Prison at 87

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Sept. 1, 2000

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Anthony Corallo, the salty and stoical former boss of the Lucchese crime family who went to jail for life after the authorities overheard him chatting to his driver about the mob's control of New York City's construction industry, died Aug. 23 in a federal prison hospital in Springfield, Mo. He was 87.

Mr. Corallo, who was serving a 100-year sentence, was said to be the oldest living gangster to have risen from one of the city's five organized crime families. He was a sitting member of the Mafia politburo, known as the commission, when he was arrested in 1985. A year later, he was found guilty on federal racketeering charges at what came to be known as the commission trial -- a 10-week smorgasbord of gangland lore that resulted in the conviction of the city's top crime leaders. It also paved the way for a new era of crime leader, a more rough-and-tumble crew of underlings, like John Gotti, who dressed in a flashy way and seemed to bask in the limelight.

Mr. Corallo, known to mobsters and federal agents alike as Tony Ducks -- because of his knack for ducking subpoenas and convictions -- was widely regarded as an old-time don, a crusty but gentle son of La Cosa Nostra, who believed in honor, staked his reputation on his word, adored his family and considered loose lips a treachery worse than murder.

It was in some ways curious, then, that investigators captured hours of conversation between him and his driver, Salvatore Avellino Jr., by planting a listening device inside the dashboard of Mr. Avellino's black Jaguar as it sat in a parking lot of the Huntington Town House, a Long Island catering hall, in 1982.

The taped conversations became one of the primary building blocks of the federal case against Mr. Corallo and two other Mafia bosses -- Anthony Salerno of the Genovese family, who was known as Fat Tony, and Carmine Persico of the Colombo family, known as Junior -- as well as five other gangland counselors and underbosses.

Among the more dramatic allegations against Mr. Corallo and some of his co-defendants was the charge of conspiracy to murder Carmine Galante, the head of the Bonanno family, and two associates in 1979. They were killed in a hail of gunfire as they ate lunch on the patio of a Brooklyn restaurant.

The commission trial, which opened in Federal District Court in Manhattan on Sept. 9, 1986, and ended on Nov. 19, 1986, was a sort of Waterloo for the New York mob. No previous trial had ever focused directly on the highest levels of Mafia leadership, and some investigators have said that the five families never truly recovered.

Anthony Corallo was born in 1913 and raised in East Harlem, where he worked, at least for a while, as a tile-setter. He rose in the ranks of a Lucchese family that was governed at the time by Gaitano, or Tommy, Lucchese, whose illicit businesses from gambling and loan-sharking to truck hijacking and labor racketeering were centered in the Bronx. When Mr. Lucchese died of cancer in 1967, Mr. Corallo was the early favorite to be his successor.

But Mr. Corallo did not immediately get the job. He was in prison for bribing James L. Marcus, then the New York City water commissioner, in exchange for contracts to clean and repair parts of the city's enormous water reservoir system. Carmine Tramunti was installed as the Lucchese boss, but when Mr. Tramunti himself was arrested a few years later, Mr. Corallo took over.

Mr. Corallo's reign atop the Lucchese family was marked by an interest in labor racketeering, particularly in the private trash-hauling business and in million-dollar Manhattan construction projects. According to federal wiretap transcripts, Mr. Avellino once told his boss that they were being followed in the car, probably because the authorities believed that Mr. Corallo controlled the toxic-waste disposal industry. Mr. Corallo gave a simple response. "They're right," he said.

By all accounts, Mr. Corallo continued the Lucchese family's longstanding penchant for shying away from the limelight. In a time when a mob boss's suit could light up a room, he was given to wearing gray cardigan sweaters, one former investigator said.

Michael Chertoff, the lead prosecutor on the commission trial, who later became the United States attorney for New Jersey, said Mr. Corallo was as stoical as they came. "He was very impassive in court, unlike some of the other defendants, who, at least, would kid around a bit," he said. "He sat there like one of these big stone idols."

According to Ronald Goldstock, the former director of the New York State organized crime task force who spent nearly a year listening to the secret tapes from Mr. Avellino's car, Mr. Corallo never really became acclimated to the flashier world of the mob that emerged in the 1980's.

"At the time he ascended," Mr. Goldstock said, "bosses tended to be insulated, prison sentences were fairly minimal and people who rose to his level were tested. They were trained and they were proven. But by the time the 80's rolled around everything had changed. The new people didn't grow out of the gangs of Little Italy or Brooklyn. They were untested and untrained."

Friends of Mr. Corallo, who spoke on the condition that they not be named, said he enjoyed pasta, opera and working in the garden outside his home in Oyster Bay Cove, on Long Island. They said he cherished his privacy and that his family was the dearest thing to him in the world. They would not provide any information about his survivors, a son and a daughter.

