

John Franzese, Mafioso Who Consorted With Celebrities, Dies at 103

Prosecutors said Sonny Franzese, a No. 2 in the Colombo organization, was a fearsome killer and an enduring mob “earner,” remaining active into his 90s.

By Selwyn Raab

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John Franzese, who emerged as one of the deadliest, most prosperous and longest-living Mafia chieftains while basking in the company of celebrities like Frank Sinatra and Rocky Graziano, died on Monday, almost three years after he was released from prison because of his advanced age. He was 103.

His son Michael said Mr. Franzese, who was known as Sonny, died in a hospital in the New York area but gave no further details. He had recently lived in the Jackson Heights section of Queens, his son said.

Well into his 90s — an age when most mobsters are retired or deceased — Mr. Franzese (pronounced FRANCE-ese) remained a significant underworld figure, identified by the federal authorities as the underboss, or second-in-command, of the Colombo crime family in the New York City area.

At 94, in a trial in which he appeared using a wheelchair and hearing aids, he was convicted on federal charges of running extortion rackets in Manhattan and on Long Island. He was released from federal detention in Massachusetts in June 2017 after turning 100. The authorities said at the time that he was the oldest inmate in the federal prison system.

Prosecutors portrayed him in his prime as one of the Mafia’s top “earners,” generating many millions of dollars in loot, and as one of its most fearsome killers. In 1967, prosecutors asserted that an informer had heard Mr. Franzese boast that he had been involved in 40 or 50 underworld executions.

At his last trial, in 2011, prosecutors said a turncoat had secretly recorded him graphically describing how hit men should dismember and dispose of bodies to evade arrest. “I killed a lot of guys,” he was quoted as saying in a pretrial hearing. “You’re not talking about four, five, six, ten.”

Yet he was tried for murder only once, in a state court in 1967, and acquitted.

John Franzese was born on Feb. 6, 1917, in Naples, Italy, where his parents, Carmine and Maria (Corvola) Franzese, were visiting. Both had immigrated to the United States from Italy. John was the youngest of 19 siblings — four sons and 15 daughters. His mother gave John the nickname Sonny.

The parents remained with the child in Italy for six months before returning to their home in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn, then a largely ethnic Italian neighborhood. His father ran a bakery.

A high school dropout, Sonny worked at the bakery before being drafted into the Army in 1942, shortly after the United States had entered World War II. He was discharged that same year, classified as “psychoneurotic with pronounced homicidal tendencies.” He later contended that the discharge had mistakenly stemmed from his frequent complaints that he wanted combat action to “kill” the enemy, rather than being assigned to kitchen duties.

Back in Brooklyn, Mr. Franzese, a muscular 5-foot-9, prided himself as an amateur boxer and rugged brawler. His street swagger attracted the attention of gangsters in the Profaci organization, one of New York’s five original Mafia families. With a blood oath he was inducted at age 33 as a “made” soldier in 1950. He soon earned a reputation as a “workhorse” and a “big earner” in the Mafia, or Cosa Nostra (Our Thing), running extortion, bookmaking and loan-sharking rings in Brooklyn and Queens and on Long Island.

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Joseph Profaci, the head of the organization, died of cancer in 1962, and the next year Joseph Colombo became boss of the family. One of Mr. Colombo’s first moves was to promote Mr. Franzese to capo, or captain, putting him in charge of a so-called crew of 10 soldiers and scores of criminal followers known as associates.

In the 1950s and ’60s, Mr. Franzese, who listed his occupation as owner of a dry-cleaning store in Brooklyn, was known for hosting parties for show business luminaries, including Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr. at the Copacabana nightclub in Manhattan.

An avid boxing fan, he was frequently at nightclubs in the company of Rocky Graziano and another middleweight boxing champion, Jake LaMotta, who was the central character of the 1980 Martin Scorsese film “Raging Bull.”

Another favorite dining place was the Russian Tea Room, next to Carnegie Hall in Manhattan, where Mr. Franzese met with movie producers, talent agents and music record executives. He obtained financial stakes in the enormously profitable 1972 pornographic film “Deep Throat,” the 2003 feature film “This Thing of Ours” and the Buddah Record Company.

The district attorneys of Nassau and Suffolk Counties in the 1960s branded Mr. Franzese the czar of bookmaking and loan sharking on Long Island after raids on illegal operations. The New York State Liquor Authority said he was suspected of extorting protection money from nightclubs and bars in Queens and on Long Island. And the New York State Commission of Investigation said he had muscled in to extract payoffs from pornographic peep show suppliers. None of these allegations led to criminal charges against him.

His first felony conviction — on federal charges of masterminding four nationwide bank robberies — came in March 1967. Nine months later, in December 1967, he was the subject of a state trial in Queens on charges of ordering the death of a suspected government informer, whose body, with 17 stab wounds and six bullet wounds and weighted with two concrete blocks, was discovered in Jamaica Bay. He was found not guilty.

After appeals lasting three years in the bank robbery case were denied, Mr. Franzese, in 1970, began serving an indeterminate term of up to 50 years. He was paroled in 1978, but, in a series of revolving-door parole violations, he spent about 20 of the next 30 years in federal penitentiaries.

Investigators believed that Mr. Franzese, on being paroled again in 2001, was viewed as an elder statesman in the Colombo family, which had been racked by convictions and internal feuds. In 2005, Thomas Gioeli, the Colombo’s acting boss, elevated him to underboss, according to the F.B.I.

With the law-enforcement spotlight again on Mr. Franzese in 2011, he was convicted on federal charges of extorting protection payments from two Manhattan strip clubs and a Long Island pizzeria. At age 94, he was sentenced to eight years in prison.

His son, John Jr., was a vital prosecution witness, testifying that he had cooperated with prosecutors against his father in an effort to end his drug addiction and turn his life around. His father had tutored him in Mafia tactics.

Another son, Michael, said in an interview for this obituary in 2015 that their father was “devastated” by John Jr.’s betrayal. Michael and John Jr. are from Mr. Franzese’s second marriage, to Cristina Capobianco, who died in 2012.

In addition to Michael and John Jr., Mr. Franzese is survived by another son, Carmine; two daughters, Marianne Chin and Lorraine Scorsone — all from his first marriage — and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Michael Franzese had been a Colombo capo before publicly renouncing his ties to the Mafia in 1995. He said that he, too, had been taught Cosa Nostra tactics and rules by his father, and that he was aware that his father had approved an edict by Colombo leaders to kill him for defecting.

“My father was a chameleon,” he added. “At home, a loving father and husband, but on the street, a hard-core guy who never had regrets, never would admit to any crime, never give anybody up, never violate his Mafia oaths — a mobster all the way.”

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