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GAMBINO FAMILY

Riccardo (Richie) Cefalu Dead at the age of 92

By DIMAILO SANTOLO — February 15, 2020 1 Comment



Riccardo Cefalu GL

Gambino crime family member Riccardo (Richie) Cefalu, an old-school wise guy known as a man who lived by the rule “admit nothing,” died Jan. 23 at the age of 92.

Part of the Gambino’s Sicilian faction, Cefalu emigrated into the United States from Italy in 1965, settling in Greenlawn, Long Island, where he was still living with his wife when he passed away.

In the early 1980s, Cefalu was facing a stiff sentence after being arrested on charges of international drug trafficking and was held on a \$10 million bond.

But mobsters, it seems, especially those in the Gambino family, have a way of wrangling themselves out of trouble.

Cefalu’s arrest came after feds linked him to the smuggling of 120 pounds of drugs with a street value of \$90 million into the United States from his native Italy, routed through France and Switzerland.

The mobsters attempted to prevent drug-sniffing dogs from detecting the contraband at Kennedy International Airport by spraying false-bottom suitcases with perfume – “It worked every time,” Cefalu testified during his first trial for the crime – but some boxes were finally intercepted going through customs after a yearlong investigation by the Federal Drug Enforcement Agency.

The investigation began after the DEA noticed large amounts of drugs coming from Palermo through Rome to New York. They then began collecting evidence, including surveillance of suspects in both the U.S. and Italy and wiretaps on the telephone of at least one NYC suspect.

The bust could have meant dying behind bars for the Cosa Nostra member, but luck was definitely on the side of the mobster and the 10 others busted for drug running between the summer of 1979 and November of 1980 when their short-lived smuggling activities crumbled.

Oldest TV news magazine crushes prosecution’s case

Federal narcotics investigators had dubbed the drug ring the “Sicilian connection,” and said participants processed morphine from the sap of poppies grown in such Middle Eastern countries as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran into drugs before bringing it into the U.S.

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With wiretap evidence, the feds had a pretty airtight case against Cefalu and the other drug couriers – who along with the drugs smuggled into the U.S. also carried suitcases of money back to Sicily, adding to the already damning evidence – but a jury that was not sequestered put everything into a tailspin during the 1981 trial.

Close to the six-week trial's end, jurors saw a segment of the long-running news program "60 Minutes" that focused on drug smuggling and contained information too similar to the "Sicilian Connection" case, which resulted in a mistrial.

Back in Federal District Court in Brooklyn in 1982, following the mistrial, things went down a little bit differently.

Despite the evidence, prosecutors were reluctant to retry the case since none of the defendants were willing to plead guilty despite the evidence, under orders from Sicilian mobsters including the head of the **Gambino family**.

"What he said went," said one of the attorneys involved in the case.

Because of that, Cefalu and the 10 other defendants, armed with a top-notch team of lawyers, worked out a deal with Judge Eugene H. Nickerson. Although they were convicted of the same crimes, they were handed down significantly reduced prison stints along with an unorthodox arrangement that allowed Cefalu and his cohorts to be sentenced without pleading guilty for the crimes with which they were charged.

"You can't call it a plea-bargaining arrangement because there was no plea," said Victor J. Rocco, who was at the time serving as chief of the criminal division in the office of Edward R. Korman, then the United States Attorney in Brooklyn. "In effect, we agreed to sentences, and they agreed to waive a jury trial."

If Cefalu, believed to be the kingpin of the U.S. faction of the drug ring – which operated out of a pizzeria as a front – had gone to trial and been convicted of his crimes he could have faced a life sentence.

He was released from prison on New Year's Eve of 1987, and never again ran into any trouble with the law, despite his low-profile but respected place in the Gambino family.

All in the Gambino family

Cefalu's nephew, Domenico ("Italian Dom") Cefalu, was also sentenced in the 1980 drug trafficking case, although he only served six years, and later did time on racketeering and extortion charges while working under Gambino capo Pasquale "Patsy" Conte, who died in late December of 2017, reportedly of Alzheimer's disease.



Domenico Cefalu

In 2011, the younger Cefalu became the new head of the **Gambino crime family**. He stepped down four years later due to his age.

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That same year, Riccardo Cefalu's son, Dominick, by then a Gambino capo, and his brother, Joseph, both faced charges of racketeering and loan sharking. They entered pleas, with Domenic getting 27 months and Joseph receiving 18 months, although at sentencing, both ultimately received no jail time, and were given probation instead.

At the time of his death, Riccardo Cefalu was considered retired from Mafia life, but he remained a trusted member of the Gambino family.

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