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# *Herbert Sperling, Drug Kingpin Tied to French Connection Case, Dies at 79*

By **Sam Roberts**

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Herbert Sperling, a convicted drug dealer from Hell's Kitchen who was accused of ordering the execution of Vincent C. Papa, the fellow mobster who masterminded the brazen theft of 400 pounds of French Connection heroin and cocaine from a police vault, died on July 3 at a hospital near Ayer, Mass. He was 79.

His death, which had not been announced, was confirmed by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, which did not specify a cause. He was being held at the Federal Medical Center-Devens, a long-term care facility about 40 miles west of Boston.

Mr. Sperling was among the first defendants to be sentenced to life imprisonment without parole, after federal judges were empowered to impose that penalty in the early 1970s in response to what was viewed as a national crisis over narcotics crime and addiction.

He spent nearly three-fourths of his life behind bars, including the last 45 years since his arrest in 1973 and subsequent conviction on drug-trafficking charges.

Prosecutors called him “the operational kingpin of a highly organized, structured and ongoing narcotics network” that smuggled heroin from France and distributed it mostly through black and Hispanic dealers on the East Coast.

Mr. Sperling had a well-deserved reputation for violence.

In 1977, he was indicted on charges of hiring three fellow inmates at the federal penitentiary in Atlanta to murder Mr. Papa, whom he suspected of turning police informant. Mr. Sperling was acquitted in the conspiracy, but two other defendants were convicted of fatally stabbing Mr. Papa in the back and chest at least eight times in a prison courtyard.

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Mr. Papa had been convicted of choreographing the audacious theft by rogue police officers of tens of millions of dollars worth of drugs from the New York Police Department's evidence room in Lower Manhattan in the early 1970s and replacing it with bags of flour and cornstarch. The crimes kick-started a consequential corruption investigation of the police.

Much of the heroin had been seized in 1962 in the Bronx from the car in which it had been shipped from the French port city Marseille. The successful investigation in the case inspired the Oscar-winning 1971 movie "The French Connection."

Mr. Sperling was also suspected in the death of Louis J. Mileto, whom police identified as a courier for the Sperling heroin ring. Mr. Mileto's frozen, headless and limbless torso was found in 1972 in the trunk of a gutted car in the Hudson Valley. He was identified by his teeth, which were found in his stomach. Investigators said he had swallowed them during a vicious beating.

A 5-foot-5, barrel-chested high school dropout, Mr. Sperling was volatile, foulmouthed and unapologetic.



Vincent C. Papa, the mastermind behind the French Connection narcotics theft. Mr. Sperling was accused of hiring three convicts to murder him in a federal prison, believing he had become a police informant. Mr. Sperling was acquitted. Mr. Papa was fatally stabbed eight times in a prison courtyard.

When the police asked him to identify the source of two pistols and an ax that were found in the trunk of his leased car, and that were later linked to three murders, he replied, “Damned if I know,” adding, using an expletive, “And you can be sure I’ll never rent no car from Avis again.”

Even at his sentencing, when he faced mandatory life imprisonment, he affected a James Cagney swagger and delivered a tirade in which he refused, as he put it, to “beg for mercy” (which Cagney ultimately did in his 1938 crime film “Angels With Dirty Faces”).

Instead, Mr. Sperling described himself as a “known bookmaker and gambler who had been victimized by false narcotics charges,” and, facing the venerable Judge Milton Pollack, boasted, “I am and always will be a better man than you.”

“All I want is justice,” Mr. Sperling insisted, “which I couldn’t get.”

To which Judge Pollack replied, “Mr. Sperling has eloquently requested a just and fair sentence.” The judge then meted out the maximum on each of several charges.

Mr. Sperling was born on Dec. 29, 1938, in Hell’s Kitchen, the gritty Midtown West neighborhood that was a notorious breeding ground for hooligans. His father, Irving, a jewelry salesman, died when Herbert was 1. His mother was Cecile (Shavitz) Sperling.

Both parents were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, and after Herbert Sperling’s death, someone posted on Facebook the message, “Herbie Sperling Rest in Peace, the last true Jewish gangster,” one of his sons noted in a eulogy.

According to a 1994 profile in *Prison Life* magazine, a copy of which resides in the New York Public Library’s research collections, he was sent to a reformatory at 13 for truancy, worked as a bouncer and boxed as a featherweight.

At 19, he was arrested in a heroin case with Joseph Valachi, the gangster who in 1963 became the first mob leader to admit publicly that the Mafia existed. (His admission might have explained Mr. Sperling’s antipathy toward informers, although Mr. Papa was apparently squealing on corrupt cops, not his organized-crime colleagues.)

“What happened to honor?” Mr. Sperling was quoted as saying in *Prison Life*. “As a kid I was taught that being a tattletale was a bad thing.”

Mr. Sperling married Josephine Chiaremonte, who died in 2001. He is survived by their sons, Nicholas, Gus and Guy; and nine grandchildren.

Mr. Sperling transplanted the family from Little Italy in Manhattan to Bellmore on Long Island, where his fleet of three pleasure boats was moored nearby.

Mr. Sperling at the United States Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pa., in 1994. Mr. Sperling, a convicted drug dealer, spent nearly three-quarters of his life in prison.

Chris Cozzone, via the New York Public Library's research collections

“He wanted us to have a better life; he wanted us to have everything that he didn’t have growing up,” his son Gus said in a telephone interview on Wednesday. “He went to his neighborhood with a truckload of toys for the kids who didn’t have any. He opened a pizzeria. He was trying to change.”

Gus Sperling said in his eulogy last month, “Unfortunately, in April of 1973 our lives would change forever.” Not only was his father arrested, but Herbert’s 67-year-old mother was also accused of complicity in his drug dealing by stashing cash and heroin in her Manhattan apartment. (She was acquitted.)

“My brother Nick was 13, me, 9, and my younger brother, Guy, was 9 months old at the time,” Gus Sperling said. “Our lives were turned upside down.”

Drugs would haunt the family, even with their father in prison. To prove his value as an informer, the convicted drug lord Leroy (Nicky) Barnes snitched to prosecutors about a drug deal, which resulted in the conviction of Nicholas Sperling in 1983.

The family held together, even when one of Herbert Sperling's grandsons died of an opioid overdose. They were sustained by daily phone conversations with the imprisoned patriarch.

"He kept us going by always thinking he'd get out," Gus Sperling said.

He added: "We never talked about what he did, but I think it's because of the way he grew up, on the streets, and he didn't know anything different. I never asked him. I guess it's something I didn't really want to know."

Herbert Sperling, insisting that he was a political casualty of the 1970s war on drugs, refused to inform on other felons.

"They were trying to squeeze him," Alan Dershowitz, one of his appellate lawyers, said in a phone interview on Wednesday. "He was not willing to compose" — make things up — "or to sing."

Mr. Sperling made headway on some of the charges against him by filing a blizzard of appeals. But he acknowledged that the conspiracy accusation was, as he put it, legitimate.

"I'm not innocent," he told Prison Life in the 1994 interview. "But life without parole? That's nuts.

"What I got is a slow death sentence," he said. "They'd be doing me a favor if they put me in the electric chair and ended the story once and for all."

**Correction:** August 17, 2018

*An earlier version of this obituary misstated the year the James Cagney crime film "Angels With Dirty Faces" was released. It was 1938, not 1932.*

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 17, 2018, on Page B12 of the New York edition with the headline: Herbert Sperling, 79, Drug Kingpin Who Planned French Connection Job