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This Week In Gang Land

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By Jerry Capeci

Feds Call On Upper East Side Restaurateurs To Take Down 86-Year-Old Wiseguy



At the upcoming trial of Genovese wiseguy Anthony (Rom) Romanello — set to start next week — there will be lots of talk about great mob-tied restaurants.



Nino Selimaj G L

The *Park Side*, the Corona, Queens restaurant that the late Anthony (Tough [Tony](#)) [Federici](#) ran for decades will likely get a mention. But Gang Land has learned that two high-priced Manhattan eateries, and their owners, will play major roles in the government's efforts to convict the 86-year-old Romanello of extortion.

Nino Selimaj, the owner of *Nino's Restaurant* on the *Upper East Side* is slated to join his brother Bruno, the proprietor of the *Club A Steakhouse* as a government witness against Romanello and reputed Genovese mobster Joseph Celso, according to court filings in the case. *Club A* is about 15 blocks south and an avenue west of *Nino's* on First Avenue but it also claims *Upper East Side* status on its website.

Rom, as Gang Land disclosed last year, served up a one punch knuckle sandwich knockdown to [Bruno Selimaj](#) at his pricey steakhouse on May 17, 2017. According to the feds, Romanello was acting as an enforcer for a Queens bookmaker in an effective effort to collect \$86,000 that two relatives of the restaurateur owed the bookie.



Anthony Romanello

Prosecutors allege that the assault of Bruno Selimaj by the octogenarian mobster convinced Nino Selimaj to pay the \$86,000 that their nephew, and his brother-in-law, had lost several weeks earlier in wagers with Queens bookie, Luan (Lou) Bexheti, a codefendant of the mobsters who pleaded guilty last month.

In court filings, prosecutors Dana Rehnquist, Irisa Chen and Rebecca Schuman say they will prove [at trial](#) that Romanello and Celso, who was present at *Club A* when the punchout occurred, were enforcers for the illegal gambling outfit that Bexheti worked for. Celso, 51, was allegedly involved in collecting the gambling debt through extortionate means.

Nino Selimaj, whose restaurant website notes that *Nino's* has long been a favored eatery of Carol Burnett, Tony Bennett, Clint Eastwood, Chris Noth and members of *The Sopranos* including James Gandolfini and Tony Sirico, has had a customer-patron relationship for many years with Celso, according to prosecutor Chen.

Between 2012 and 2019, Chen told Brooklyn Federal Court Judge Eric Komitee, Nino Selimaj placed bets with Celso. And when Nino decided to pay off the gambling debt that his nephew Tony and brother-in-law Eddie owed to Bexheti shortly after Romanello assaulted [Bruno Selimaj](#) at his restaurant, Nino reached out Celso.



Bruno Selimaj G L

"The evidence," Chen told Komitee, "will show that this victim (Nino) engaged and actually paid back the debt to Mr. Celso. And so their relationship and the victim's prior gambling with Mr. Celso is actually how they knew each other and how they developed the relationship so that the victim and Mr. Celso connected for this debt repayment."



Joseph Celso G L

The prosecutors allege that Celso, who was at *Club A* the evening that Romanello punched Bruno Selimaj, can be seen on a surveillance video walking towards Selimaj in a threatening manner and forcing him back "until other waitstaff at the restaurant became involved." Celso and Romanello then left the restaurant.

"Nino connects with Mr. Celso because Mr. Celso is at the restaurant" when Bruno is punched, Chen told Komitee. "And through that relationship, the debt is actually paid off. And Nino's relationship to Mr. Celso developed because of the gambling they engaged in together; Nino placing bets with Mr. Celso."

In a court filing, the prosecutors say they can prove, apparently through Nino's testimony, that Celso committed an overt extortion act against Bruno Selimaj the day after he was punched in the face. They allege that Bruno withdrew a police report he had filed against Rom the night before after Celso told Nino that his brother Bruno "should drop the charges against [Romanello](#), otherwise the situation could escalate."

In pretrial discussions, Celso's attorney, Gerard Marrone, stated that his client is not charged with illegal gambling and that allegations that his client took bets from Nino have nothing to do with the charges against him, or the illegal gambling operation that Bexheti was part of. They were prejudicial against his client and should not be introduced as evidence in the case, he argued.



Irisa Chen G L

Komitee rejected Marrone's claim, as well as a similar motion by Romanello attorney Gerald McMahan, to prevent the government from introducing allegations that Rom was involved in taking bets in an unrelated gambling operation in 2014 from one of the witnesses.

The judge also rejected arguments by both attorneys to block prosecutors from playing numerous tape-recorded talks involving Bexheti and other members of the Queens bookmaking business he worked for since neither mobster was an alleged member, or was ever picked up in any of the 179,900 conversations that were tape-recorded by the Queens District Attorney's office.



Gerard Marrone G L

McMahon argued that since both defendants are charged only with the [extortionate collection](#) of a debt, there was no need to prove that the debt was a gambling debt, only that the men used extortion to collect it. For that reason, the lawyer argued, the gambling tapes would confuse the jury and also prejudice the defendants if they were played.

The feds argued successfully that even though the mobsters are not heard or even discussed on the tapes, the government has witnesses who will testify that Romanello and Celso were acting as enforcers for the gambling ring when Rom punched Bruno Selimaj and when Celso threatened him to withdraw his police report and when Celso collected the \$86,000 from Nino Selimaj.

One of the tapes the government says it will play has a conversation — apparently the only discussion in which the word "enforcer" is mentioned — between Bexheti and a second ring member who are heard talking in code about the Selimaj relatives from whom the ring would try to get the \$86,000, namely "this kid," and

"his uncle," according to prosecutor Chen. The kid, Tony, worked at his Uncle Bruno's restaurant.

In the discussion, Chen told Komitee that one of the gamblers stated, "Relay the message, whatever, and then, you know -- listen. It's only so much you and I can do. We're not the fucking enforcers."

And on the next page of the transcript, she said, one of them says, "You know, listen. The office says they want his address." It's the government's theory, Chen told the judge, that Romanello and Celso "are, in fact, the enforcers of such a conspiracy," and were the ones who used extortionate means to collect the debt.



McMahon has told Gang Land that Rom's one punch assault of Bruno Selimaj came during a personal dispute between two men who'd known each other for 30 years and that the indictment of Romanello "is the most frivolous case I've seen in 45 years of practicing law," adding that it's "the government's third attempt to get Anthony Romanello and like their first two tries, this one will also fail."



Komitee also precluded McMahon from claiming at trial that the government's charges against Rom are part of a long running vendetta against his client that began more than a [decade ago](#) when the FBI promised to indict him on old [gambling charges](#) if he refused to implicate Tough Tony Federici in any illegal activity. They did it twice, but failed to put him behind bars, either time.

McMahon is prohibited from bringing that up, but prospective jurors have been told that they will hear testimony about Tough Tony Federici and his *Park Side* restaurant and that they will also learn about Bruno and Nino Selimaj and their restaurants during the trial.

Marrone, who has told Gang Land that his client is a "legit businessman" who "has nothing to do with this situation" told Komitee during pretrial discussions that Celso was merely "present" at the Club A when Bruno Selimaj was punched and never issued any threats against Nino Selimaj.

Two Days Later, Sure-Footed *Perry Mason* Prosecutor Takes It On The Chin

This month, assistant U.S. attorney Andrew Roddin looked like a sure-footed *Perry Mason* when he caught mobster Steve (Stevie Blue) LoCurto falsely claiming on

the witness stand that he had seen another gangster in a hospital — months after the gangster was already dead.

That same week, however, the AUSA was slapped down by a defense lawyer when he tried to convince a judge to detain a mob associate based on a set of dubious claims that were soon proven in court to be wrong.

Prosecutor Roddin's reversal of fortune came on November 8 at the detention hearing of Vincent (Vinny Slick) Minsquero, 36. That hearing was just two days after the prosecutor used a [death certificate](#) to undercut mobster LoCurto's tall tale about a hospital sighting he claimed to have had during his evidentiary hearing, Gang Land has learned.

Roddin's first assertion to seek detention for Minsquero as he awaits trial for racketeering along with Gambino capo Joseph ([Joe Brooklyn](#)) Lanni and eight others was flat out wrong, according to a transcript of the bail hearing.



Andrew Roddin G L



Louis Gelormino G L

Roddin began his pitch by telling U.S. Magistrate Judge Ramon Reyes that the feds had "evidence" that Lanni had helped Vinny Slick obtain the property he was planning to post as collateral for bail he was seeking. This soon proved embarrassingly wrong, since the property belonged to Minsquero's mother and father and was where he lived.

That brought a loud objection from Minsquero's lawyer. "As an officer of the court" he said he was "appalled" by Roddin's claim, since the government knew the attorney was posting the property where his client's mom and dad had lived on Staten Island for 30 years, as well as his sister's home, and he had emailed prosecutors the deeds for both properties.

As he had told prosecutors before the court session, attorney Louis Gelormino told Reyes, he had received the deeds via email from Lanni's wife, who was "friends with Mr. and Mrs. Minsquero, who had never been through this before," and he had mistakenly forwarded that email to the government.

His client's parents "have never dealt with a situation like this. Unfortunately, Ms. Lanni has," Gelormino said. "They've been friends for a long time," the lawyer stated, and she was at their home when he was speaking to them on the phone, and she "sent me an email with the two properties that Mr. Minsquero would post in case he had to post bail."

Roddin probably should have stopped there.



Vincent Minsquero GL

But after Gelormino knocked down that claim, the prosecutor then questioned Minsquero's motive for stopping Lanni from filling a container with gasoline at a gas station across the street from the eatery where Joe Brooklyn had threatened the owners. According to what Roddin and two co-prosecutors had told the Court in their detention memo, when Minisquero had tried to return the gas container, Lanni attempted to physically prevent him from doing so.

The prosecutor then made another leap ahead of the facts.



"I think it's fair to infer that he wasn't doing it out of the goodness of his heart" but that Vinny Slick "was doing so to protect (his) captain, to protect the enterprise," said Roddin. "It's not a good look for a captain in an organized crime family to try to burn a restaurant, and arson attracts attention," he noted.

The contention that his client acted "for untoward reasons" was "disingenuous," said Gelormino. His client, he said, is a "good guy" with no prior arrests, and he "didn't want to see any kind of escalation of a situation" on September 1. Lanni is charged in a state case in New Jersey with assaulting the owners of *Roxy's Bar & Grille* in Toms River after they threw him out for being drunk and disorderly.

The [assault charge](#), and a follow-up alleged threat by Joe Brooklyn to burn down the restaurant, according to a filing by Roddin and prosecutors Anna Karamigios and Matthew Galeotti, alleges that Lanni is a danger to the community and that he should be detained as he awaits trial.

And in a contentious disagreement about that assault — the feds say it occurred after Lanni had boasted he was a "Gambino" and had called them to tell them to "beg for my forgiveness" and was heard stating that by a Toms River [police officer](#) — Gelormino bested Roddin's argument that Vinny Slick was still a suspect in the assault of the restaurant owners.

His client was cleared by the victims, without any allegation of fear or favor, the lawyer insisted.

The prosecutor had told Reyes that after the owners had checked with a friend about Lanni's mob ties, and were told, "Yes, Joe Lanni really was a Gambino," they contacted Toms River Police and said they didn't want to pursue the matter any further "because they learned he was a member of an organized crime family."

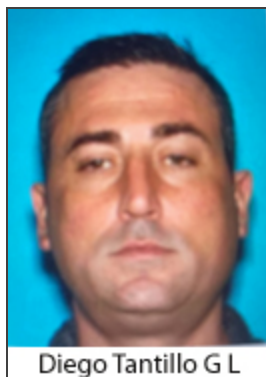


In his client's case, said Gelormino: "The owners of the restaurant, before they found out that Mr. Lanni was a so-called Gambino captain, refused to pick Mr.

Minsquero out" of a lineup. "It wasn't after, it was before," he said.

Lanni, 52, remains detained. Minsquero was ordered released, on a \$1 million bond, secured by the homes of his parents, and his sister.

Gambino *Goodfellas* Not That Bad, Home For Thanksgiving



Two Gambino wiseguys will enjoy a happy Thanksgiving Day at home with their families after being released from the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn yesterday.

Their release was granted over the strenuous objections of federal prosecutors who had used very little pertinent evidence to dub the duo as dangers to the community and gangsters who were likely to flee rather than stand trial on racketeering charges.

Mobsters Diego (Danny) Tantillo and [Angelo \(FiFi\) Gradilone](#) posted bond packages that were almost identical to those they offered back on November 8, when they were charged as part of a six-year-long racketeering conspiracy headed by Gambino capo Joseph (Joe Brooklyn) Lanni.

Brooklyn Federal Judge Frederic Block mused aloud during oral arguments over their detention. "In the past, we would let murderers out on bail," he said. That was a point made by defense lawyers in their appeals of the decision by U.S. Magistrate Judge Ramon Reyes that ordered them detained without bail as they await trial.

"We don't have anything close to that in this particular case," Block noted, after reading the filings submitted by the government and the defendants and listening to their opposing arguments.



Gradilone was inducted into the Gambino crime family in 2019 and has two convictions for weapons possession from the 1990s. He is not charged with engaging in any violent activity between 2017 and this year, according to all accounts, including the indictment and the government's detention memo.

In asking Block to order FiFi's release on a \$1 million bond secured by signatures of his wife and mother-in-law, and their home, federal defender Michael Schneider stated that the only crime Gradilone is charged with is having a "no show" job for

which he allegedly "received pay and benefits for work he did not perform" between 2019 and 2021.



Michael Schneider GL

Schneider wrote that Gradilone, 57, has "lived at the same address on Staten Island with his wife, children, and mother-in-law for 20 years." When he was last arrested, more than 20 years ago, he "was released on bond" and allowed to remain free even after he pleaded guilty, the lawyer wrote, noting that Gradilone "was allowed to voluntarily surrender to serve his sentence."

There is "no evidence" that Gradilone "ever attempted to obstruct justice" or "intimidate a witness," Schneider wrote. He said the government had presented "no reasonable argument" that his client "poses any risk of flight," and asked Block to set a bond of \$1 million or less, as Reyes had done for five co-defendants he deemed were neither a danger to the community or a risk of flight.

[Tantillo](#), 46, of Freehold, NJ, was also "straightened out" in 2019, and is charged with several violent extortions and arson. But attorneys Andrew Weinstein and Marc Fernich argued that a \$5 million bond secured by eight properties posted by him, relatives and friends would assure the safety of the community and remove any risk that he would flee rather than face the charges.

In federal courts across the country, "scads of suspected mafiosi" including "alleged bosses and other leaders, often facing far graver charges," have been "granted pretrial release in cases claimed to revolve around organized crime," the lawyers told Block in their court filing and in court on Tuesday.

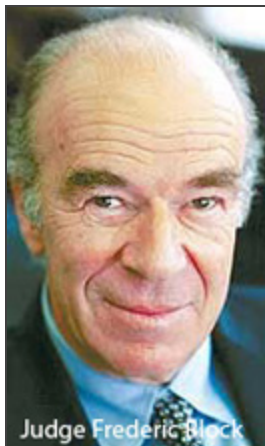
In arguing for Tantillo's release on bail, the attorneys noted that for nearly three years, since February of 2021, when the feds disclosed in search warrant applications that Tantillo was [under investigation](#) for racketeering activity, he has not absconded or committed any alleged violent activity and there is no evidence that he is a danger to the community or a threat to flee.



Andrew Weinstein

"It's a safe bet that he'll continue to toe the line" rather than risk the properties that have been pledged to assure his compliance by violating "any conditions that the Court imposed," they argued.

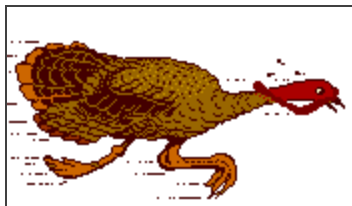
"If mere knowledge of an investigation sufficed to discourage further misbehavior," Weinstein and Fernich wrote, "imposing formal conditions after indictment can only serve to redouble the deterrence."



Judge Block agreed with the defense arguments, noting in his written opinion that each defendant had "consented to home detention and strict monitoring by pre-trial services."

"After carefully considering the evidence presented by the parties, both to this Court and to Judge Reyes," Block wrote, "the Government has not met its burden to overcome the presumption of liberty" that both defendants are entitled to since conditions do exist that "could reasonably assure" their appearance as well as "the safety of the community."

Block decided pretty quickly that detention was unwarranted, but he indicated at first that he would order their release tomorrow. But when Schneider explained that Black Friday was a court holiday and that might be difficult to arrange, the judge said he would "let them out tomorrow" so they could celebrate Thanksgiving with their families today.



Happy Thanksgiving to all our readers, and their families, no matter where you're spending the holiday. We extend a special thank you to those who've supported us since we became a paid subscription site in June of 2008. We wouldn't be here without you! Thanks much!

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