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This Week in Gang Land

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By Jerry Capeci

Ex-NYC Buildings Inspector Fingers Genovese Wiseguy In 1997 Cold Case Rubout



A corrupt, mob-connected former New York City buildings inspector is a key witness against a Genovese mobster who is awaiting trial for what could be the most unlikely alleged mob rubout to ever

make its way into federal court — a 21-year-old cold case stabbing murder outside a neighborhood tavern in Yonkers, Gang Land has learned.



John Tortora Jr. G L

Law enforcement sources say the witness, a longtime Luchese family associate, has told the feds that wiseguy John (Johnny T) Tortora ordered the killing of Richard Ortiz because he suspected that Ortiz had stolen money from Joker Poker machines that Tortora had in several bars and other locations in Westchester at the time.

The sources say the witness, Carmine Francomano Jr. asserts that he got that information from the man who was arrested and charged with stabbing Ortiz to death in November of 1997, Abdill (Chino) Saez. Francomano Jr. allegedly claims that Saez told him that "he killed Richie for Johnny T" because Tortora suspected that "Richie and his brother were breaking into his machines and stealing money from him."

In a three count indictment, Tortora, who followed his late father, John Tortora Sr., into the Genovese family orbit, is charged with ordering the murder of Ortiz as part of a racketeering enterprise that includes drug dealing, loansharking and extortion from 1997 until this year. The Justice Department has not yet decided whether to seek the death penalty for 61-year-old Johnny T, who is detained without bail as a danger to the community.



Sources say Francomano informed FBI agents and Yonkers detectives, who [arrested Tortora](#) on murder-for-hire charges in August, that Saez also stated that Ortiz was "a rat." But that was "an excuse" that Saez created during one discussion, Francomano told the feds. The sources say



Carmine Francomano

that at other times, Saez told Francomano that "Johnny T was upset" about the thefts and "wanted them to stop."

Francomano has told the feds, according to the sources, that he got the damning information about Tortora from Saez after he killed Ortiz in the early hours of November 11, 1997 outside the Mill Bar on Lockwood Avenue. Francomano stated that he witnessed Saez kill Ortiz and then drove him away from the scene after Saez had flung the murder weapon across the street towards the overpass of the nearby Saw Mill River Parkway, the sources say. At the time, Francomano was 31, Saez 30, and Ortiz 29.

Francomano also has told the feds that he, Saez and Ortiz had been in the bar together but left separately, the sources say. Ortiz walked out first, after an argument with Saez. Francomano left soon after, and was sitting in his car when he saw Saez exit the bar, wrestle Ortiz to the ground, stab him several times, and then walk to his car, "with a bloody knife in his right hand," the source said.



The law enforcement sources say that after Francomano dropped Saez off at a fast food parking lot, he drove around to "clear his head." A day or two later, he fingered Saez for the killing in an anonymous phone call to police, who found the knife and arrested him for the murder.

But, as Gang Land reported three months ago, the Westchester District Attorney's office dropped the charges against Saez back in April of 1998 when its prosecutors decided they didn't have the evidence needed to convict him at trial.

In 2009, Francomano was charged with accepting \$80,000 in bribes as an inspector for the city's Department of Buildings from 2005 to 2009 in a [state racketeering](#) indictment of 29 mobsters and associates by the Manhattan District Attorney's office. He pleaded guilty to reduced charges last year, and was sentenced to time served — about 11 months behind bars all told. But his cooperation with the feds and Yonkers Police had nothing to do with that sentence.



Snappy Francomano

In fact, he spent more time behind bars than many other defendants in that case, including his brother Frank, and their father, Carmine (Snappy) Francomano. His brother and father each pleaded guilty to enterprise corruption, and were sentenced to 1-to-3 years. But Frank spent two months behind bars and Snappy, who has a bunch of prior arrests, was in state prison for nine months.

Francomano's attorney Norman Steiner said his client's guilty plea had no cooperation component. He told Gang Land he had "no idea" that Francomano was a government witness. "Carmine is a real gentleman who didn't deserve to do any time in jail," said Steiner. "They thought he was a mobster, but he's not."

When Yonkers detectives and the FBI contacted Francomano regarding the current probe, sources say he blew his stack when he learned that prosecutors had dropped the Saez charges in 1998 because they feared he

would admit killing Ortiz when he testified with immunity before a grand jury, thus making it impossible for them to charge anyone for the crime. Under state law, grand jury witnesses automatically get full immunity for their testimony about the subject matter of the grand jury investigation.

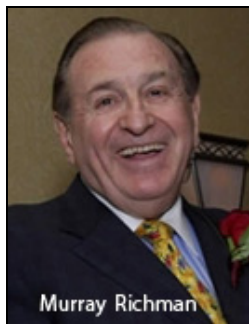
Sources say Francomano complained that even though he did "the right thing" back then nothing good came out of it. Saez wasn't prosecuted, and Francomano's "name and reputation" were tarnished, he lamented, said one source, because "Johnny T told everyone in the neighborhood that he was the rat who told police" that Saez had killed Ortiz.



When FBI agent Thomas Hallinan and Yonkers cold case detective John Geiss arrested Johnny T, he seemed to think he was being arrested for a different murder — that of Alexander Saccone, a mob-connected boxer and enforcer who was shot to death in 1985, his body dumped across the street from St. Mary's Cemetery in Yonkers.

Law enforcement sources provided this account of the back and forth he had with them:

"I told you four years ago I didn't know anything about Saccone's murder," said Tortora. When Geiss replied that he was being arrested for the Ortiz murder, Johnny T exclaimed: "I never heard of Richard Ortiz; he's not even Italian."



But later on, sources say, when Johnny T arrived at Manhattan Federal Court for his arraignment, something must have jogged Tortora's memory about Ortiz's murder. He said he remembered reading about it in the newspaper, and that "the guy who was arrested" for it had a cousin who used to work for his check cashing business he's had for years.

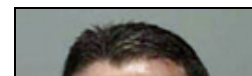
Arrests for murder are never nice things. But Hallinan and Geiss picked a particularly bad day when they banged on the door of Tortora's Yonkers home at 6 AM and arrested him on August 2. Tortora told them that he was planning to start a small vacation later that day, driving to the Jersey shore to spend a few days at his family home in Bradley Beach.

If the feds have their way, it'll be a long time before Johnny T's able to make that trip.

Tortora's attorney, Murray Richman told Gang Land back in August that his client "vehemently denies" knowing Ortiz or "having anything to do with" his killing. He declined to comment yesterday. The FBI, U.S. Attorney's office, and Yonkers PD were also mum about the case.

Guilty Pleas In 'Extraordinary' Case Of The Turncoat Who Videotaped His Mob Induction

It took a little longer than planned to iron out the details, but federal prosecutors in Brooklyn quietly got two guilty



pleas last month in cases stemming from the daring undercover work of Vincent ([Enzo](#) [Morena](#), the Italian-born mob informer who tape recorded his induction into the Bonanno crime family in Canada three years ago next week.



Gambino soldier Paul Semplice, a member of the powerful Sicilian faction of the crime family, and Paul Ragusa, a violent mob associate with longstanding ties to the Bonanno and Gambino families, each copped plea deals in separate cases that evolved from a two year-long joint investigation by U.S. and Canadian law enforcement agencies.

The first to take the plunge was [Semplice](#), who was tape recorded several times by Morena. Semplice had been slated to cop a plea deal in the first week of September. But it took another month for lawyer Allen Frankel and the Brooklyn U.S. Attorney's office to agree on the 30-to-37 months "sentencing guidelines" that he would face for his first felony conviction.

Semplice, 56, also agreed to forfeit \$35,000 in loansharking profits to the government, with a \$5000 initial payment due by January 15, the day he is slated to be sentenced by Judge Pamela Chen. Following his release from prison, he will have three years to pay the balance, with the first \$5000 payment due six months after he concludes whatever sentence he receives.



The Brooklyn-based mobster will not be able to appeal any prison term that is 41 months or less. For its part, the government has agreed not to ask Judge Chen to impose a sentence longer than the maximum 37 months called for in plea agreement.

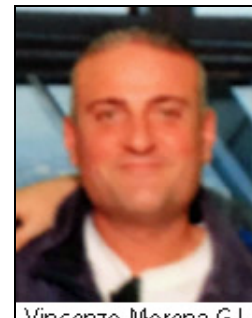
Semplice also agreed that on sentencing day Judge Chen could consider \$35,000 in profit he got from a large loan he extended to a "big businessman" in 2016 that he discussed with the informer during the undercover probe.

In his taped talks, Semplice told Morena that he has a "very special relationship" with Lorenzo Mannino, whom prosecutors say is a "powerful" capo in the Sicilian faction of the crime family that has shunned the thumb-in-your-eye tactics used by John Gotti since they took back control of the *borghata* in the years following the Dapper Don's death behind bars.

"We're like brothers, you know, and he wants to keep me by his side," said Semplice, who linked Mannino to his loansharking business during a discussion in which he told Morena that he had \$200,000 on the street and was "banking \$7000 a month" from a single customer he called a "big businessman."

The customer, Semplice explained, gave him \$4500 interest "every two weeks," according to a court filing. "That's \$9,000 a month I get, right? I give him \$1,000 every two weeks. I'm banking \$7,000 a month. I'm doing good," he said.

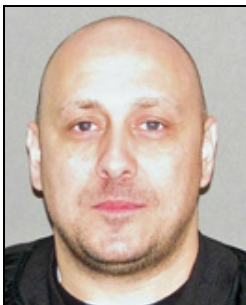
Prosecutors have also stated that Semplice has ties "to multiple other 'made' members and associates of the Gambino crime family from across the country and around



the world." In 2016, they assert, he introduced Morena "to [Vincenzo Morena](#) the 'boss' and 'underboss' of an international organized crime family from Italy who the defendant knew to be 'Gambino guys.'"

Two weeks after Semplice bit his bullet, Ragusa copped his own plea deal to resolve charges of buying a small arsenal of weapons from Morena — three machine guns, two assault rifles, two automatic rifles, three semi-automatic pistols, and two trusty, old fashioned revolvers. Ragusa made the weapons deal while finishing up a 19-year term for racketeering and murder in a halfway house.

Ragusa, 47, will serve a much longer stretch behind bars than Semplice. But his lawyers, Eric Franz and Marc Fernich, did pretty well for him. His sentencing guidelines are 92-to-115 months, and the statutory maximum term he can get is 10 years. He had faced life in prison and a mandatory minimum of 15 years on the original indictment.



Damiano Zummo GL

And by time he gets sentenced in February, Ragusa, whose halfway house status was revoked when he was arrested a year ago, will already have 14 months under his belt, and should be released by time he is 55 — unless he makes another bad decision before that happens.

Meanwhile, Bonanno mobster [Damiano Zummo](#), is trying to keep the important role he played in presiding over the November 15, 2015 videotaped ceremony — what then-U.S. Attorney Bridget Rohde called "an [extraordinary achievement](#) for law enforcement" — from airing in Brooklyn Federal Court by working out a plea deal for his drug trafficking and money laundering case.

"The reason why we're here," Zummo told Morena, according to a snippet of the initiation rite that's been released, "you're gonna be an official member of the Bonanno family. Everybody approved it, so from this day forward, you're a member of the Bonanno family. Congratulations."

Zummo and his cousin Salvatore Russo, who are charged with selling a kilogram of cocaine for \$38,000 in a Manhattan gelato parlor in September of last year, are also involved in plea negotiations with the feds. Their next court session is scheduled for November 30.

[Ask Andy](#): The Mafia And Skimming In Las Vegas

Six decades after the Chicago Outfit and Cleveland gangster Moe Dalitz operated the casino at the new *Stardust Hotel* in Las Vegas, and 23 years after the movie classic *Casino* put the story of the Mafia's huge cash cow on the big screen, the only mob skimming you'll see in the billion dollar a year gambling mecca these days is in reports about the old days in the *Sin City's* mob museum.

But for decades, skimming was a cost of doing business for the hotel-casinos in the basin of the Mojave Desert.



Andy Petepiece

A year before the Stardust opened, police in New York unexpectedly obtained evidence that the powerful Genovese crime family had a financial interest in the newly opened *Tropicana Hotel/Casino*. On May 2, 1957, cops found a note with private financial info about the Tropicana in the suit jacket of family boss Frank Costello after he was wounded in an assassination attempt.

It wasn't enough "evidence" to charge Costello or anyone else with a crime — two Tropicana employees were banned from the hotel/casino — but it clearly established that Costello held a hidden interest in that resort and was getting part of the loot that was being skimmed from the profits.



In 1961, the FBI learned from a bug in the office of Ed Levinson, majority owner of the downtown *Freemont Hotel & Casino* that Levinson was the center of a massive skim operation which stole cash not only from the Freemont, but also the *Sands, Flamingo, and Horseshoe Club*.

The amount of the skim would vary. In January, 1963, Levinson said that \$700,000 a year was being stolen from the Horseshoe Club. The next month he stated that \$280,000 was skimmed from the four casinos in February. Clearly big dollars were being set aside for the secret owners and out of the reach of the tax man.

A courier would take the skim to Miami and eventually put it in the hands of Meyer Lansky. On one occasion, the tapes revealed that Lansky received a \$123,500 kickback, kept \$81,000 and funneled the remaining \$42,500 to Gerardo (Jerry) Catena, the acting Genovese boss.

A bug in the office of capo Angelo (Gyp) DeCarlo revealed that he had hidden interests in the Horseshoe Club, the Freemont, and the Sands and got about \$5,500 a month from Catena.

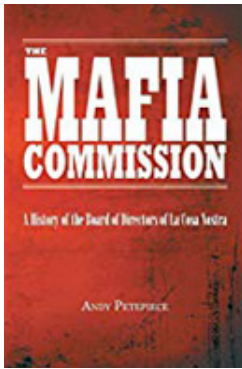
The feds eventually filed suit against Levinson and his associates. Not much happened to the skimmers because the info came from the FBI's illegal bug. Levinson pleaded guilty to tax charges in 1964, and paid a \$5,000 fine. The skims continued.



In October of 1966, a top FBI informant revealed that Cleveland boss John Scalish had been receiving \$40,000 a month in skim money from the Desert Inn and splitting it — not evenly of course — with other family mobsters for years. No charges were ever filed based on this information.

The Frontier Hotel/Casino was also not immune from the skim. Leaders of the Detroit and St. Louis families were convicted in 1972 of holding hidden interests in that casino that earned them an estimated \$250,000 a month from the place. Anthony Zicarelli of Detroit and Anthony Giardano of St. Louis were each sentenced to four years in prison.

A year later, Meyer Lansky and five others were indicted for stealing \$36 million from the Flamingo between 1960 and 1967. In the end, all the effort put into the investigation appeared to be wasted. Lansky avoided trial for health reasons. Four others pleaded out with the unluckiest defendant being sentenced to one year in prison and a \$20,000 fine. Again, the skim rolled on.



By the mid-1970s, the Tropicana Hotel & Casino, which opened in 1957, was in a financial crisis. A gullible heiress, Mitzi Stauffer Briggs, invested nearly \$5 million into the hotel/casino to keep it alive, and then dumped another \$6 million into the sinking ship, which was a cash cow for the Kansas City mob.

Briggs and her fellow owners were so desperate for cash, they agreed to let a minion for Kansas City boss Nicholas Civella into the inner circle of the casino in return for Civella's influence in getting Teamsters Union Vice President Roy Williams to obtain a loan from the union's benefit funds. Civella's men looted about \$40,000 a month out of the Tropicana before the FBI accidentally got onto the skim while investigating a Kansas City mob war.

While investigating the Tropicana skim, the FBI uncovered other skimming operations at four other casinos controlled by the Argent Corporation. The Stardust, Freemont, *Hacienda*, and *Marina Hotel* casinos were under this umbrella. In the 1980s, Civella and the bosses of mob families in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Chicago, and many underlings, were convicted and jailed for the Tropicana and Argent skims.

Editor's Note: Andy (Ask Andy) Petepiece has a new book about the nearly 100-year history of the mob's ruling body, *The Mafia Commission*, that's available at Amazon.com, and many other online book stores, including the Apple Store. The soft cover is \$15; the e-book version is \$9.



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