

4/30/05 Chi. Trib. 1
2005 WLNR 23464726

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
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April 30, 2005

Section: News

Agent recounts Spilotro murders tale

Brothers lured to DuPage home by promises of higher mob ranking, then killed, FBI says
Matt O'Connor, Tribune staff reporter. Tribune staff reporters Liam Ford, Ray Gibson and
Todd Lighty contributed to this report.

The mob told Anthony Spilotro he was going to be promoted to a "capo," a street boss running a huge territory. His brother Michael was to become a "made" member, a trusted insider.

For the honors, the two were driven to a house near Bensenville--where mobsters jumped them, then beat and strangled them.

A federal agent gave this account in federal court Friday, the first time the government has revealed what it believes happened nearly 20 years ago in one of Chicago's most notorious mob hits.

Authorities also revealed their source for the information--Nicholas W. Calabrese, a mob hit man-turned-informant who even implicated himself, confessing that he took part in 15 gangland murders, according to testimony Friday.

Calabrese's cooperation led to the indictment announced Monday of 14 reputed Outfit members and associates, half of them in connection with 18 long-unsolved mob murders.

In testimony Friday at a detention hearing for reputed top mob boss James Marcello, FBI Special Agent Michael Maseth said Calabrese had implicated Marcello in the 1986 Spilotro murders as well as the 1981 homicide of Nicholas D'Andrea and two bombings.

Despite James Marcello's offer to let law enforcement intercept his telephone calls if he was released from custody, U.S. District Judge James B. Zagel ordered him and his brother, Michael, held without bond.

Authorities also revealed that as part of the Operation Family Secrets probe, the FBI and IRS

secretly recorded conversations of James Marcello while he was incarcerated in federal prison in Michigan and wiretapped the cell phone of Michael Marcello.

In one conversation in June 2003, authorities said the Marcello brothers discussed paying off Calabrese to keep quiet. Calabrese told authorities his wife was paid \$4,000 a month after he complained to James Marcello about the lack of financial support, Maseth testified.

"That was the best investment," a transcript made public Friday quoted James Marcello as saying as he waved his arm. "Believe me."

But Michael Marcello appeared less certain. "I hope so. I hope it works out that way, buddy....," he is quoted as telling his brother. "But I just hope he don't turn around."

An insider's details

But Calabrese, whisked away to a federal prison in Ashland, Ky., had begun cooperating with the FBI a year and a half earlier, giving investigators an insider's details on mob murders that had gone unsolved for decades.

Maseth testified that Calabrese had agreed to cooperate after he had been confronted with evidence on some of the murders. Calabrese, who was also charged in Monday's indictment, has been promised only that his cooperation would be made known to the judge, the agent said. A plea agreement on those charges hasn't been completed, he said.

James Marcello's lawyer, Marc Martin, blasted the government indictment as being staked entirely on the word of an unreliable convicted felon who faced the death penalty if he didn't cooperate. Martin also emphasized that no physical evidence linked Marcello to the Spilotros' murders.

Calabrese's claim of involvement in 15 murders would make him one of the mob's most prolific known hit men. Salvatore "Sammy the Bull" Gravano, the mob turncoat crucial to the conviction of New York crime boss John Gotti, claimed responsibility for 19 gangland murders.

Calabrese has told the FBI that in a 1983 ceremony, he was "made" a member of the Outfit with an all-star cast of reputed mobsters that included brother Frank Calabrese Sr., Marcello, Rocco Infelice, Albert Tocco and John Matassa Jr., who was later booted out as head of a Laborers Union local in Chicago.

The requirement for membership: "They have to kill someone," Maseth testified.

According to Calabrese's account to the FBI, the mob originally plotted to kill the Spilotro brothers in Las Vegas with explosives. Anthony Spilotro ran the Outfit's operations there and ran afoul of mob bosses.

Killing in Phoenix

On the way there, the hit team--Calabrese, co-defendant Frank Schweihs, James DiForti and John Fecarotta--stopped in Phoenix and killed Emil Vaci to prevent his testimony against a mob leader, Maseth said.

The Las Vegas plot went awry for unexplained reasons. But Calabrese told authorities that years later, while he and James Marcello were incarcerated in a federal prison in Downstate Pekin, Marcello said he had supplied the explosives for the planned hit.

Instead, the Spilotros were lured by mob bosses to the Bensenville area home near Illinois Highway 83 and Irving Park Road on the promise of being promoted another rung up in the Outfit, Maseth testified.

Calabrese told the FBI that Marcello drove the Spilotros to the home, Maseth said.

In addition to himself and Marcello, Calabrese said Fecarotta and another man also took part in the murders, Maseth testified. Mob boss Louis Eboli was present as well, the agent said.

In announcing the charges Monday, U.S. Atty. Patrick J. Fitzgerald said Frank Calabrese Sr. had also been involved in the killings.

"Were they killed at that location?" asked Assistant U.S. Atty. Mitchell Mars, chief of the organized crime section.

"Yes, they were," Maseth said.

Calabrese said he and Marcello didn't take part in removing the bodies, according to Maseth. The Spilotros were later discovered buried in a shallow grave in an Indiana cornfield. Fecarotta was killed three months after the Spilotros' murders, possibly for botching the burial.

At the time, the coroner of Newton County, where the Spilotros were buried, suggested the brothers may have been buried alive. But this week, the doctor who performed the autopsies said in an interview that this was untrue and that the brothers had died of beatings.

"We found nothing that would indicate that they were buried alive," said Dr. John E. Pless, a professor emeritus at Indiana University.

Calabrese also alleged that James Marcello played a role in a 1982 bombing that destroyed a van but failed to kill its target--identified in press clippings at the time as Nicholas Sarillo, a restaurant owner. "It had something to do with gambling," Maseth testified. The mob plot was dropped when the target didn't cooperate with authorities in an investigation of the van bombing, the agent said.

Bombing allegations

Marcello also was alleged by Calabrese to have ordered the 1989 bombing of the Cicero residence of the mother of mob turncoat Mario Rainone, Maseth said. Rainone stopped cooperating after an explosive device damaged his mother's porch, according to the testimony.

After Calabrese agreed to cooperate with the FBI, he at first concealed Marcello's alleged involvement in the Spilotros' murders out of gratitude for Marcello's financial help to his family while imprisoned, Maseth said.

Another FBI agent, Edward McNamara, testified that agents on surveillance in November 2001 saw what may have been an argument among Michael Marcello, Schweihs and reputed mobster Anthony Chiaramonti outside a Northlake restaurant. Eleven days later, Chiaramonti was killed outside a Lyons restaurant.

In the secretly recorded conversations in the Michigan prison, James Marcello was upset with the way Chiaramonti and Schweihs had been conducting business, McNamara said.

Authorities continue to search for Schweihs, an alleged enforcer with the nickname "the German," and Joey "the Clown" Lombardo, reputed to be the one-time leader of the Chicago Outfit.

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REGION: (USA (1US73); Americas (1AM92); Michigan (1MI45); Illinois (1IL01); Indiana (1IN12); North America (1NO39); Nevada (1NE81))

Language: EN

OTHER INDEXING: (FBI; INDIANA UNIVERSITY; IRS; LABORERS UNION; LYONS; MARCELLO; NORTHLAKE; OUTFIT; SALVATORE; US ATTY) (Albert Tocco; Anthony Chiaramonti; Anthony Spilotro; Calabrese; Chiaramonti; Edward McNamara; Eleven; Emil Vaci; Fecarotta; Frank Calabrese; Frank Calabrese Sr.; Frank Schweihs; James B. Zagel; James DiForti; James Marcello; John E. Pless; John Fecarotta; John Gotti; John Matassa Jr.; Louis Eboli; Marc Martin; Marcello; Mario Rainone; Martin; Maseth; McNamara; Michael; Michael Marcello; Michael Maseth; Mitchell Mars; Nicholas D'Andrea; Nicholas Sarillo; Nicholas W. Calabrese; Patrick J. Fitzgerald; Rainone; Schweihs; Spilotros)

KEYWORDS: SUBURB; ORGANIZED CRIME; MURDER; ASSAULT; MULTIPLE; PROBE

EDITION: Chicago Final

Word Count: 1485

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