



The Hood In Our Neighborhood

John (Sonny) **Franzese**, a rising young Long Island executive, seems like a model suburbanite. He's a good family man and a quiet neighbor. But don't try to get too chummy with the man: his business is crime.

By **Bob Greene**

Newsday Staff Writer

Almost every morning at 10:30 a crew-cut, well-dressed man, handsome in a craggy-faced way, kisses his wife goodbye, pauses momentarily to inspect the meticulously trimmed lawn of his development home and then leaves for work in New York City.

He is a prototype of the rising young executive, aggressive, dynamic, moderate in his habits, a good family man, careful with money and so absorbed in his work that lunch, when he manages to find time for it, is usually a quick date-nut bread sandwich at Chock Full O' Nuts. He could be working for IBM, GM or Chase Manhattan. But he isn't.

He is John (Sonny) Franzese, 45, of 47 Shrub Hollow Rd., Roslyn, tabbed as the fastest-rising young executive in the Cosa Nostra empire of crime. His business: supervision of underworld rackets in parts of Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens and in almost all of Nassau and Suffolk counties. The tools of his trade: greed, fear and, when necessary, the gun.

It is a hazardous trade. Aging executives of the Cosa Nostra, who sooner or later get their pension checks in the form of bullets, do not usually take kindly to ambitious young men in the organization. They are frequently found, either ventilated or garroted, littering the trunks of old cars, river bottoms and weed-grown vacant lots.

The fact that Franzese has managed to skirt these hazards in the course of his meteoric rise has won the admiration of his superiors, the respect of his colleagues, the loyalty of his troops and, according to police estimates, a tax-free income in excess of \$100,000 annually. He even has the grudging respect of the police.

Sgt. Ralph Salerno, Cosa Nostra expert for the New York City Police Department, recently said: "Sonny Franzese is the big comer in the Cosa Nostra. He has an extraordinary talent for organized crime. He knows when to compromise and when to get tough; he knows how to run a business and crime is big business, and, most important, he is an expert at not getting caught."

Franzese has been arrested a dozen times since he turned 18, on charges including felonious assault, rape and attempted **extortion**. He has been found guilty

only twice, each time for minor gambling offenses. Yet the criminal empire bossed by Franzese and his subordinates is so vast that the file maintained on them by Nassau District Attorney Cahn and his staff weighs nine pounds. Similar files are maintained by the Suffolk police intelligence squad, New York City and the Queens County district attorney's office.

A former underworld associate of Franzese said: "This guy don't make mistakes. He don't drink, which they (Cosa Nostra leaders) frown on; he doesn't blab his mouth. He's a home man, a family man, which is very important with them. You can have a broad on the side, but go home, take care of your family. They feel this—if you have no respect and no concern for your family, you won't have respect and concern for the boys."

Law enforcement authorities say Franzese is presently the underboss of the old Profaci-Magliocco crime family, one of the five Cosa Nostra families operating in the New York area. Family boss is Joe Columbo of Brooklyn, an aging executive who is gradually paving the way for Franzese to take over completely. Operating under Franzese are six or more crime lieutenants, each of whom directs from 10 to 30 crime soldati (soldiers), who in turn have their own individual criminal organizations.

His major specialty is Cosa Nostra control of the entertainment, nightclub and recording industries. But he also has geographical areas under his supervision in which he directs crime and gets a split of all crime income.

Norman Levy, rackets bureau chief of the Nassau district attorney's office, and Lt. James Brooks, commander of the Suffolk police intelligence squad, both believe that Franzese directly controls more than 50 per cent of all organized crime on Long Island. "We're convinced that he even gets a cut from some stickups," Levy said. "He seems to be involved in everything."

In Brooklyn, Queens and on Long Island, however, the major specialties of the Franzese organization are bookmaking, shylocking, extortion and infiltration of legitimate business, particularly in the bar and restaurant fields. He does not get involved in narcotics and has few racket connections in unions and construction.

Born in Naples, Italy, Franzese was brought to the

U.S. as a small child by his father, Carmine, and his mother, Maria (nee Carvola). His father opened a bakery on Lorimer Street in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn, and Franzese, his three brothers and his sister grew up in the neighborhood. Franzese had a record for getting into trouble as a juvenile, but all that changed when he came of age. He married his first wife, Ann Schiller, in 1942 and later served a brief hitch in the Army. He and his wife had three children but eventually were divorced. She now lives in Manhattan with the children, and Franzese contributes \$40 a week to their support. She works as a clerk in a New York City drugstore. There have been frequent rumors that the divorce was Cosa Nostra-ordered because his first wife was considered "uncontrollable."

In 1959, Franzese married petite, brunet Christine (Tina) Capobianco of New Hyde Park, daughter of a New York Transit Authority employe, and they moved into a house at 348 Jefferson St., Franklin Square. They sold the house in 1961 for \$27,000—\$4,000 more than they paid for it—and put down \$15,000 in cash for their present two-story colonial home in Roslyn. Total cost of the house was \$32,950. They have three children of their own, all 5 or under.

And while he was moving from one domestic scene to another, Franzese was also moving inside the mob. His cleverness and general business ability had already won him supervision of several family crime operations when the Gallo mob, led by Joe and Larry Gallo of Brooklyn, tried to grab control of the family.

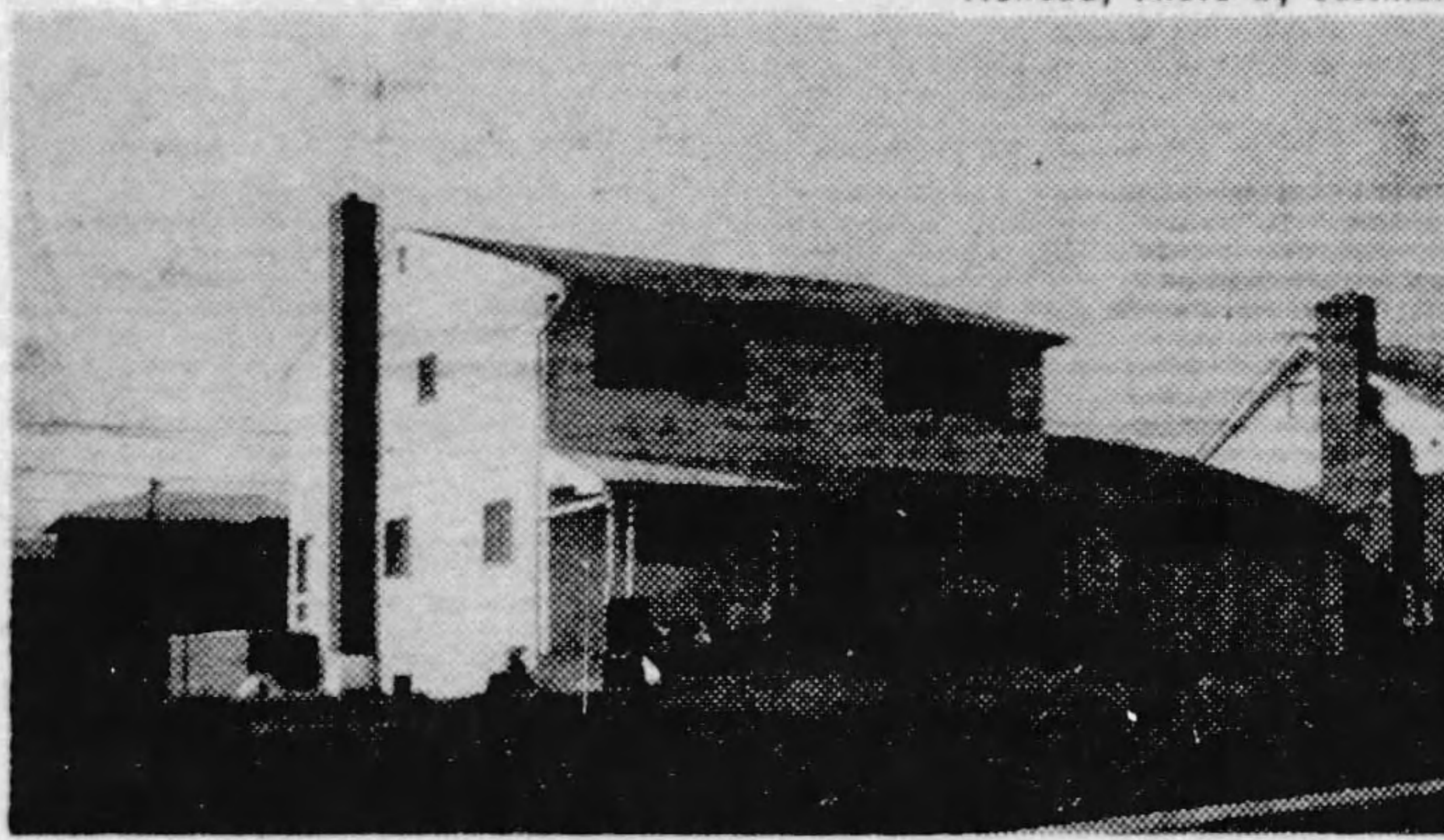
Franzese was tempted to join the revolt, but he was a clever enough mob politician to know that the odds and the guns were stacked against it. He stayed loyal. For the next two years, while opposing factions sprayed each other with bullets during the bitter mob war, Franzese, the only loyalist trusted by the Gallo brothers, made repeated efforts to get a peaceful settlement. When the war was finally ended (with the aid of other crime families) Franzese emerged as the one man trusted by both sides, and his mob power was insured.

He is a different man to different people. The Army, which discharged him in 1944 after little more than a year's service, classified him as a "psychoneurotic with pronounced homicidal tendencies." His neighbors



Dressed for trip to the city, **Franzese**, left in photo above, and former bodyguard John (Johnny Irish) Matera head for **Franzese's** car. In photo at left, Franzese, wearing the casual clothes of a suburbanite, strolls across his lawn. The house in the background belongs to a neighbor.

Newsday Photo by Sussman



Franzese's development home in Roslyn is the only house in the neighborhood without trees and shrubs. Police believe **Franzese** fears bushes would provide would-be killers with a hiding place.

regard him as a pleasant man, who lives quietly, keeps to himself and is devoted to his family. Occasional acquaintances describe him as a "nice guy." Some fellow hoodlums say he is miserly with money—"He wouldn't buy you a cup of coffee." Police, who tail him night and day, regard him as a cold, ruthless hoodlum who can occasionally display a fascinating sense of humor.

He doesn't look like the popular conception of a mobster. He is five feet, eight and a half inches tall, 170 pounds and always well-groomed when he is out in public. His black hair is crew cut and he dresses in conservative business suits (he even clings to the old-fashioned undershirts with shoulder straps). He speaks in a low, fairly cultured voice, an indication of a determined effort to lose the vestiges of a Greenpoint accent.

Like all successful mobsters, he recognizes that one of the most important protective elements he can have is the ability to be able to fade inconspicuously into the local scenery. He works harder at it than most. He chose a middle-class development home in Roslyn over the Cosa Nostra enclaves in Lido Beach and Atlantic Beach, where other gangland bosses huddle together in protective but well-publicized security.

As far as his neighbors are concerned, he is the ideal family man. Even though he frequently goes out later in the evening, he is almost always home for dinner at 5 P.M. He visits his mother, now living with his sister in East Farmingdale, two nights a week. And almost every week he dutifully takes Tina and the children to visit his in-laws in New Hyde Park.

His wife does her shopping in the local supermarket, but Franzese usually brings home the family's weekly meat supply from a butcher store in Elmton owned by some of his friends. Like all wives, Mrs. Franzese occasionally runs out of things in the middle of the week, and her husband goes to the local delicatessen for her. They have a sleep-in maid.

He likes to romp with his children in the back yard, where he has put up swings, a slide and a seesaw. And almost every Saturday morning, he takes the children for a drive in his wife's black, 1965 Chevy to a local amusement park. While he has them out, he will buy them hot dogs, ice cream and soda. He obvi-

ously enjoys himself. Each Sunday, the family attends mass at St. Aidan's Catholic Church in Williston Park.

Franzese takes his family to a Catskill resort hotel for a couple of weeks every summer. He is also building a summer home in Monticello. Four or five times a year he travels to Florida or Puerto Rico, but always on business. His family stays home.

As far as the public is concerned, Franzese maintains that he is a misunderstood, law-abiding owner of the L&R Cleaners, 635 Metropolitan Ave., Brooklyn. But a careful observer would note that there are certain things, even in the casual behavior of John Franzese, that set him apart from the rest of his neighbors.

The shrubs, for instance. Every home in Franzese's neighborhood is tastefully landscaped with bushes, trees and shrubs, particularly around the foundations and in the rear yards, which back onto busy Shelter Rock Road. Franzese has a professional gardener tend his lawn. But he has no shrubs, no trees, no bushes. Just grass.

No one knows why, and Franzese isn't saying. But police have a theory. Bullets are far more of a hazard than the common cold to Cosa Nostra leaders. Bushes and shrubs provide a close-up hiding spot for would-be killers. Police figure that Franzese feels it's a healthier climate with an unobstructed view of his grounds. It's a problem in the summer, however. When the Franzeses entertain guests on their rear patio, they have an unobstructed view of trucks roaring up and down Shelter Rock Road, just 75 feet away.

Franzese owns no car himself and rarely drives, other than on the Saturday jaunts with his children. During the Gallo war, he was picked up each morning by his chauffeur-bodyguard John (Johnny Irish) Matera, a tough, vicious hoodlum with a long record of arrests and convictions. Since then Matera has been graduated to the lush fields of extortion and armed robbery and Franzese's current chauffeur-bodyguard is Vincent Padula, a slim, little man, whose most serious recorded offense against society has been touting at a racetrack. Padula, with the Gallo war ended, is considered minimum security.

Franzese's business day begins at about 10:30 A.M., when Padula arrives in his burgundy 1964 Ford. Franzese gets into the car and they usually head into

the Manhattan theatrical district, frequently with detectives trailing at a discreet distance. When Franzese is in a good mood, he will have Padula slow down in heavy traffic and make elaborate turn signals so that the trailing detectives don't get lost. If the police observation continues for several days, however, he gets obviously irritated and tries to lose the tail.

He will visit a number of theatrical offices during the day. He will also meet people, virtually all of them criminal underlings, on street corners. Franzese correctly feels that indoor conversations about crime can be too easily bugged by police. So he will meet hoodlums on corners and keep walking around the block with them until they have finished their business talks. Then punctually, by the clock, another hoodlum will show up on the corner and the walking conversations are repeated again.

The Cosa Nostra is also fearful of police wiretaps and Franzese is a master at avoiding tapped phones. He holds many phone conversations during the day, but always from public phones. And he never uses the same public phone twice, correctly figuring that police will tap it if he does.

On one occasion, detectives from the Nassau district attorney's office were tailing Franzese in New Hyde Park down a main street on which there were numerous public telephones. Franzese got out of his car, walked back to the detectives, and said: "Pick any phone you want. Just show me where. Because you know that I'll use it once and never again."

In his Manhattan rounds, **Franzese** is almost constantly on the go. Other Cosa Nostra luminaries are fond of interrupting their labors for a long pasta-filled luncheon at a favorite Italian restaurant. But not Franzese. When time allows, he is driven to the closest Chock Full O' Nuts restaurant, where he favors a sandwich of date-nute bread and cream cheese. On other occasions, a flunky is dispatched to get a carton of sandwiches and coffee so that Franzese and his associates can have a top-of-the-desk lunch.

On varying days, **Franzese** makes stops in Queens, Brooklyn, Nassau and Suffolk. But the routine never changes: walk-around-the-block meetings and a plethora of calls from public phones. Each night he arrives home for dinner at about 5 o'clock. Several

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Neighborhood Hood

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nights a week he goes out again, sometimes coming home as late as 3 A.M.

His favorite night meeting places are the Flamboyant, on Queens Boulevard in Queens, the San Su San, on Jericho Turnpike in Mineola, and the Left Bank, on Montauk Highway in Lindenhurst. There Franzese, who doesn't smoke, meets some business associates and sips a very occasional long drink.

He has no hobbies, other than sitting at home and watching color TV, but he is an inveterate first-nighter when stars and would-be stars make their debuts in various night and supper clubs. Whenever Sammy Davis Jr., the senior or junior Frank Sinatra or Jimmy Roselli opens anyplace from the Copacabana to the San Su San, Franzese has a ringside table.

Occasionally, it goes further. When Sinatra Jr. was playing to poor crowds at the San Su San two years ago, Franzese got a quick call from his pals in Chicago. The next night the nightclub was jammed wall-to-wall with wildly applauding gunmen, extortionists and bookmakers. Franzese can always drum up a nice crowd. And as one of the top Cosa Nostra entertainment specialists, he frequently can be seen socializing in the dressing rooms of star entertainers before curtain calls.

Franzese follows a basic Cosa Nostra policy of protection, police say. It is a policy called insulation. The man who makes book or robs a motel is five persons removed from Franzese himself. Franzese gives the orders over a public phone or in a walking conversation and they are then transmitted down the line through three to seven people before they reach the man who commits the actual criminal act.

So even if the criminal is caught, it would require three to seven people to admit that the original orders had come from Franzese. Somewhere along the line, one of these people would keep silent. This, authorities say, accounts for the inability of law enforcement agencies to imprison him for crimes they know he is masterminding. Franzese gets a cut from all organized crime in his territories.

In Suffolk County last year, for example, two Queens hoodlums were ordered by Franzese to report to his Suffolk lieutenant, Phillip Vizzari of Deer Park. Both were check forgers. Vizzari introduced them to a prominent Suffolk attorney and a private detective. They were told that they would have protection for anything short of murder. The attorney and the detective would fix everything for them, if they were caught. The fee they paid to operate and for protection was 50 per cent of their take.

In handling his troops, Franzese is a master both at the art of command and compromise. In October, 1964, Nassau district attorney's detectives followed him unobserved into the bar at the San Su San. There Franzese could be observed talking to an attorney and six hoodlums. He was overheard to say: "That's the way it's going to be, whether you like it or not." His companions nodded their heads in agreement.

On the other hand, Suffolk police relate how Vizzari once got concerned about the fact that Suffolk (non-Cosa Nostra) hoodlum Julie Klein was bookmaking in Vizzari's territory. When Klein refused to budge, Vizzari set up a meeting with him in Wyandanch. But just before the meeting, he learned that Klein was sending a gunman to cut him down. So Vizzari sent a gunman, too. The two men faced each other off in the street, like something out of a western movie. Peacemakers intervened and bloodshed was tentatively halted.

Vizzari then asked Franzese, his boss, for help. Franzese, who admired Klein's bravado, met with Klein in Freeport. Franzese gave Klein the benefit of the doubt, allowed Klein to keep on bookmaking in Vizzari's territory and cut himself in for part of Klein's take. In this operation, Vizzari was the only loser. Franzese still got his cut and he now had two men competing to make better money. Klein later got out of the business. And Vizzari, who has a loyalty to Franzese that can only be described as pathological, continues to give him so much money from the Suffolk operation that Vizzari is reduced to petty crime to support himself and his family.

For Franzese, the world is his apple. He is so smart and careful and sufficiently insulated that police are frustrated in every attempt to nail him down. The Cosa Nostra accepts him as a coming king. The money flows in. And the family, knock wood, is healthy.

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