

LONG ISLAND / CRIME

At 100, mob underboss Sonny Franzese gets out of federal prison



John "Sonny" Franzese, 100, is helped by family members as he arrives at the residence where he'll be living in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, Friday, June 23, 2017. Credit: Craig Ruttle

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SHABE

DEVENS, Mass. — Sonny Franzese, the mob underboss who reigned over the Colombo crime family's Long Island rackets in the '60s from his Roslyn home with ferocity and galle, was released from a U.S. lockup Friday at age 100, the oldest inmate in the federal prison system.

Franzese, whose given name is John, left the Federal Medical Center in Devens, Massachusetts, in a wheelchair just before noon.

He was picked up by two men in a white Land Rover. He was dressed in a gray sweatshirt and appeared noticeably thinner than in the past.

Franzese said nothing when a reporter asked him if he was Sonny Franzese.

His son Michael Franzese of California confirmed, however, that it was his father after receiving a picture taken at the scene. The elder Franzese was planning to go to his daughter's home in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

The embodiment of the Mafia's tattered code of omerta, Franzese spent 35 years of a 50-year sentence for bank robbery behind bars.

"He's one of a kind," said Robert Lewicki, a retired FBI agent who persuaded Sonny's son John Jr. Franzese to wear a wire against the mob in 2005. "There's never been a guy like Sonny. There will never be another guy like Sonny, the last of a dying breed."

In his prime, according to news accounts, Franzese had a financial interest in restaurants, topless bars, clubs, several record labels and even the classic porn film "Deep Throat." He favored the traditional mob methods of making money — loan sharking and extortion.

And although law enforcement authorities believe Franzese committed or ordered the murders of up to 50 people, Lewicki is not the only former FBI agent who has a grudging respect for him.

"I think it's amazing that he stood up," said Bernard Welsh, a former FBI agent who arrested Franzese several times on parole violations. "He never gave anybody up."

Franzese defied criminal stereotypes by living quietly on Long Island, adhering to a disciplined work schedule and maintaining a stable family life, his son Michael said. He was the subject of a December 1965 Newsday profile headlined "The Hood in Our Neighborhood" by former Investigations Editor Bob Greene, who called Franzese "a prototype of the rising young executive."

But a year later, he was embroiled in three separate investigations for heinous crimes: accused of ordering the murder of a one-eyed mob gunman turned informant, Ernie "The Hawk" Rupolo, who was found in Jamaica Bay with a weighted rope around his neck and a chain around his legs; charged with masterminding the home-invasion robbery of an Oceanside jukebox executive, in which the man's teenage sons were handcuffed to a pipe in the cellar; and conspiring with four hoods to rob banks from Utah to Massachusetts.

The cases generated a steady stream of headlines and photos starting in the fall of 1966. Franzese's reputation for brutality was so great that when a Newsday photographer snapped a dramatic picture of Franzese being escorted out of the Nassau County courthouse by policemen carrying shotguns, the picture appeared in print without crediting the photographer.

Franzese was acquitted in the murder and home-invasion cases but convicted in April 1967 in the bank-robbery conspiracy — a crime his family maintains he didn't commit.

"My father was who he was in my former life, but he was no bank robber," said Michael Franzese, himself once a Colombo capo who made his own headlines when he left the crime family and lived to talk about it. "He was absolutely framed."

For former FBI agent Lewicki, whether he conspired to rob banks may be irrelevant.

"It's an absolute certainty that he committed numerous other crimes, including violent crimes, murder, etcetera," he said. "He got away with a lot, but he was convicted of something he may or may not have done. It's also true he's got bodies under his belt."

In an extraordinary move, then-federal Judge Jacob Mishler sentenced Franzese to 50 years in prison, with no minimum term. With that hanging over his head, prosecutors offered to get his time reduced if he talked.

He didn't.

"That's unusual today," Welsh said. "You look at all these bosses, they have rolled over, every one of them."

Michael Franzese recalled that when Mishler sentenced his father, Sonny Franzese declared, "You watch, I'm gonna do the whole 50."

Despite his lack of cooperation, Franzese managed to get paroled at least six times, according to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons. But each time, he ended up back in prison — typically for associating with other felons. He last got sent back in 2010 when, at the age of 93 and in a wheelchair, he was found to have been shaking down the Hustler and Penthouse strip clubs in Manhattan and a pizzeria in Albertson.

He did his time, and is now facing life on the outside as a centenarian, having outlived virtually everyone else in the case that cost him a third of his life. Three of his co-defendants, his attorney and the judge who sentenced him in the bank-robbery case are all dead.

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