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'I done the time': Longtime mob underboss Sonny Franzese, 102, tells his story

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Now 102 years old, John (Sonny) Franzese, the longtime underboss of the Colombo crime family, is the epitome of the old-style crime chieftain. Despite the entreaties of FBI agents and a 50-year prison sentence for a crime he swears he didn't commit, Franzese did his time and never talked.

He's talking to Newsday now.

"They wanted me to roll all the time," he said over a bowl of pasta e fagioli in the nursing home where he now lives. "I couldn't do that. Because it's my principle."

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In his first extended interviews following his release in June 2017 as the oldest inmate in the federal prison system, Franzese spoke to reporters as he never has, reflecting on a criminal life rooted in New York City and on Long Island that spanned the birth, glory days and current lower profile of traditional organized crime.

"What we done in New York is unbelievable," he said.

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Linked by law enforcement to multimillion-dollar bookmaking, loan sharking and extortion rackets and caught on tape alluding to multiple murders he claimed to have committed, he remained mute through more than 35 years behind bars as mob boss after mob boss violated the mob's code of silence in exchange for lighter prison sentences.

He was silent, even though he hated prison. "I could never give a guy up because I knew what jail was," he said. "I wouldn't put a dog in a jail pod."

John (Sonny) Franzese is helped into his daughter's Brooklyn home by family members in June 2017. Credit: Craig Ruttle

He spoke to Newsday, in part, because he said he remembers reporters treating him fairly after his conviction for conspiracy to rob banks in 1967. But it is also clear that as he pushes through the infirmities of old age — he has a pacemaker, hearing aids and is nursing a broken hip — the prospect of death and a possible afterlife are not far from his mind.

He said he prays every night.

Asked about the prosecutors and judge who sent him to prison, who have all died, Franzese said, "I'll meet them in hell."

Sonny today

Alert, animated and with slightly graying hair, he claimed to have struck up relationships with Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield and the 1950s television star Dagmar. He chuckled as he perused old photos of himself in the tabloids, looking both fierce and dapper in his cashmere overcoat. And he gloated over his own Ocean's 11-style celebrity.

Asked if he knew Frank Sinatra, Franzese replied: "You asked the question the wrong way. You should have asked, 'Did Frank Sinatra know Sonny Franzese?'"

By turns avuncular and crude, he answered questions about his extraordinary life. But he deflected questions about his mob family, how he ran the rackets, or prominent mob bosses such as Frank Costello and Joseph Bonanno.

Asked about Omerta — the mob code of silence — Franzese professed ignorance, even confusion. "What does that mean?" he said with dramatic flourish. "I don't get it."

Franzese was more open about his own family. He talked about "love at first sight" when he met his second wife, Tina, a 16-year-old cigarette girl at The Stork Club, a famed celebrity hangout of the '40s and '50s, as well as the pride and pain he felt about his sons, who joined him as partners in crime before breaking away.

He worries about his grandchildren, exhorting them to get an education, and says he has told many younger relatives to go straight, for practical reasons, at least. "There's no money in crime no more," he said.

And although Franzese is angry about what he sees as his unjust imprisonment, he expressed no bitterness — "I done the time."

Franzese looks far younger than he is and remembered details of the various criminal charges against him with clarity, particularly those surrounding the bank robbery conspiracy that he insists he was not involved in.

John (Sonny) Franzese walks into the federal courthouse in Uniondale on June 18, 1982, as he surrenders to authorities. Credit: Newsday / Ari Mintz

"I was a firm believer that if a guy knew something about you, you had to worry about it," he said, referring to the men who actually robbed the banks and later testified that he was the mastermind behind them. "So I'd have to be a nut to rob banks."

Franzese is keenly aware of his place in the annals of crime as someone who over more than 75 years never turned in a confederate. He asserted that "no one in history" has done what he did and grandiosely even compared himself to Jesus Christ.

"Jesus suffered," he said. "He didn't squeal on nobody."

Mob code

His toughness earned him the reverence of street hoods and a grudging respect from law enforcement. The late Gambino boss John Gotti was caught on a federal wiretap marveling at Franzese's refusal to rat: "Sonny Franzese, he's one tough [expletive] guy, one tough, [expletive] guy." The late Bernard Welsh, an FBI agent who arrested Franzese for violating parole, agreed in an interview with Newsday in 2017: "He demanded so much respect because he did all that time and he never gave anyone up."

Authorities believe Franzese personally killed or ordered the murders of dozens of people. In a December 2006 conversation secretly taped by a mob associate, Gaetano Fatato, Franzese said as much himself: "I killed a lot of guys … you're not talking about four, five, six, 10."

Franzese's commitment to the mob is so complete that he went along with contracts on the lives of two of his sons, who, unlike their father, cooperated with law enforcement, according to court records and one of the sons, Michael.

Michael, 67, flipped while facing his own prison sentence for racketeering and conspiracy and later left the mob to become a movie producer and evangelical pastor. John Jr., 58 — Franzese's favorite child — wore a wire to gather evidence against the Colombos. He then testified against his father, 93 at the time, and later entered the federal witness protection program.

Today, Franzese regularly uses a wheelchair to get around. But he said he manages to do 40 squats every morning and tries to walk as much as possible. He is convinced he'll get rid of the wheelchair.

In prison, he said, "I learned one thing: Determination is stronger than anything."

Early life

Franzese was born in Naples and came to New York as a young boy, part of a massive migration of Italians arriving in New York by 1920. One of 16 children — only 10 survived to adulthood — he was the youngest son.

He said he got good grades in school, but the allure of the street proved irresistible. It also probably was inevitable. His father, Carmine (The Lion) Franzese, had considerable "prestige in the Mafia," according to Treasury Department records.

In 1931, Franzese was "straightened out," or inducted into the mob , when he was just 14, his son John said. But it wasn't announced until two years later.

Early on, Franzese had an aptitude for crime. By 1935, when he was 18, he said, he was running the largest craps game in New York. A "wise guy" hosted the game, he explained, but "I was the one running it."

Franzese's first recorded arrest came on Jan. 7, 1938, in Brooklyn for felonious assault. Within three years, three more followed — two for disorderly conduct and one for third-degree assault — but none of them stuck.

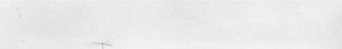
In 1944, he was dishonorably discharged from the Army for "homicidal tendencies," according to court records. Franzese said his superior officers liked his quick intelligence and fighting spirit but that his gambling and liaison with a major's wife probably were what got him into trouble.

Calling himself "a die-hard American," he said, "I was a good soldier."

His rise

After the Army, Franzese resumed his street life and racked up 10 more arrests through June 1963. When he was arrested, he gave his occupation variously as salesman, baker or self-employed tailor, according to police records. The charges, ranging from vagrancy to rape, all followed a strikingly similar pattern — they were either dismissed or he was acquitted. All are sealed, according to the court.

In time, according to FBI records, he acquired businesses, among them the Le Tique Disco and Decameron Room in Levittown, the Apple Orchard Restaurant in Roslyn and the El Elegante in Hicksville, all now defunct.



The home of John (Sonny) Franzese on Shrub Hollow Road in Roslyn in 1970. Credit: Newsday / Bill Senft

“I started buying businesses, you know,” he said. “I started a used car business. I started making money and then I opened up a club, another club, another club, and I started making big money. Never under my name, though. I couldn’t get a [liquor] license.”

Asked why he couldn’t get a license, he said, smiling, “I was a bad guy.”

Franzese’s financial empire was so vast and his power so great that bona fide tough guys feared him, and still do, according to former mob associate Sal Polisi.

Franzese rose quickly through the mob ranks and became a capo because he was what is known as an “earner,” generating steady income for himself and his bosses in the Colombo family, his sons said. He also became known as someone who would act ruthlessly on his bosses’ orders.

“I wasn’t a guy that was afraid, you know,” he said. “Don’t forget, I fought everybody.”

In 1963, Genovese gangster Joseph Valachi appeared before a televised and explosive U.S. Senate hearing on organized crime, revealing for the first time the secrets of La Cosa Nostra. More significantly for Franzese, Valachi identified him as a member of the Profaci family, which was the precursor to the Colombos, according to Senate records.

Then-Nassau District Attorney William Cahn, who went to Washington D.C. to debrief Valachi, became keenly interested in Franzese. So did FBI agents.

“One time, I met an FBI agent on the street,” Franzese said. “And he said to me, ‘[On] account of you, we could have broke the Mafia up. We had Joe Valachi, and if you would have opened up, it would have destroyed the Mafia. You wouldn’t help us.’ I said, ‘Go and F yourself!’ And I walked away from him.”

On top

Franzese defies many mob stereotypes. Family and friends vouch for his assertion that he didn’t drink, smoke or do drugs. He cared about his money and was particularly entrepreneurial in infiltrating legitimate businesses.

His self-discipline and wariness were legendary. Franzese’s son Michael remembers that when he and his father were discussing business, his father would routinely lead him into the bathroom of their Roslyn home and turn on the water to drown out their conversation.

By the 1960s, he controlled half the Colombo family’s rackets on Long Island and was seen as the family’s next boss, according to law enforcement sources. He was well-regarded by his criminal associates, who used him to broker deals between feuding mob factions. If he guaranteed a deal, people knew it was good, said his son John.

John (Sonny) Franzese and wife, Tina, leave federal court in Uniondale, where their son Michael Franzese was on trial, in December 1985. Credit: Newsday

If Franzese had a weakness, it was for his immediate family. He was deeply in love with his second wife, Tina, whose volatile temper influenced the family dynamic as much as her husband’s outlaw life. She died in 2012.

Ruggedly handsome with a swagger many women found irresistible, he frequented the city’s top clubs, especially the Copacabana, where Frank Costello — boss of the Luciano mob family, which was the precursor of today’s Genovese family — was a silent partner and Franzese was an honored guest among the celebrities.

Sinatra? The Rat Pack? Dionne Warwick? “I knew them all,” he said.

Life in the early ’60s was good for Franzese. As Newsday’s Bob Greene reported in December 1965 when Franzese and his family were living in Roslyn: “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.”

John (Sonny) Franzese, center, is led back to a police car on Dec. 29, 1966, after visiting a funeral parlor in Brooklyn after his mother died. Credit: Newsday / Marvin Sussman

The fall

By 1966, Franzese's swagger and success had become too much for law enforcement. In that single year, four different prosecutors filed charges against him.

"Sonny Franzese back in 1966 was one of the pre-eminent organized crime figures in New York, if not the United States. And everybody wanted to get glory," said Ed McDonald, former chief of the federal Organized Crime Strike Force in Brooklyn.

The indictments came in rat-a-tat fashion: In March, the Manhattan district attorney charged him with being the "muscle man" in a $10 million bookmaking ring in the garment district. In April, the U.S. Attorney's Office charged him with conspiring to rob banks and obstruction of justice. In October, the Queens district attorney indicted him in the homicide of Ernest (The Hawk) Rupolo, a one-eyed mob hit man from Baldwin.

And in December, the Nassau district attorney accused him of engineering the home invasion of an Oceanside jukebox executive in which two teenagers were handcuffed to a pole in the basement and gagged with duct tape.

"It was a conspiracy to get me," Franzese said in his nursing home. "There's, there is no question about it."

He beat three of the cases — the homicide and home invasion trials ended in acquittal, and the bookmaking case was resolved with a plea to a misdemeanor — but he was convicted of a conspiracy to rob banks across the country and was sentenced to 50 years in prison.

John (Sonny) Franzese is escorted down a staircase by armed officers at Nassau County police headquarters in Mineola on Jan. 5, 1967, on his way to an arraignment. Credit: Newsday / James O'Rourke

He insisted he is innocent of that.

"Never happened," Franzese said. " … It ain't right for something I'd never done."

But Franzese did the time, he said, because "I didn't want to rat on anybody."

After exhausting his appeals, he entered prison around Easter in 1970, resolute. He vowed "to do the whole bid."

He hated prison but set his mind to making the most of it. He became a boccie player and a handball champion.

"When I was away, I would run five miles a day, every day," he said. "And then I would go and play handball. I would win, too."

But his bottom line on prison — where he spent more than a third of his long life — is "I hate everything about it."

Paroled for the first time in 1978, Franzese returned to prison five more times as he violated his parole again and again by associating with fellow mobsters. Then in 2010, at age 93, he was sentenced to eight more years in prison after being convicted of extorting the Hustler and Penthouse strip clubs in Manhattan and a pizzeria in Albertson.

The conviction was based, in large part, on tapes made by his son John, who also testified against his father.

Asked about that, Franzese said: "Can't answer that. I don't know what happened to him. Maybe all the drugs he took. Screwed his mind up."

In an interview, John said he had become sober in 2001 after battling a yearslong drug addiction. He took the witness stand not because he was charged with a crime but because he needed to testify against the wiseguy life he was desperate to escape.

His father, eyes cast downward, said: "Listen, it broke my heart. He would be the last guy I thought would do that. But he did it."

Nonetheless, Franzese said he has no regrets about his life.

The bottom line, he said: "I never hurt nobody that was innocent."

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Sandra Peddie has been a special writer on Newsday's investigations team since 1993. She has won more than 50 journalism awards and was a finalist for the Public Service Pulitzer Prize in 2014.

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