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A novelist mines his Mafia legacy

Genovese grandson paints fictional tale with family flavor

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By CORMAC GORDON

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Some people think Phil Genovese, Jr. resembles his grandfather.

"Around the eyes, maybe," the world's newest novelist was saying the other day. Genovese has just had his first novel, "The Grandfather Clause," published by Author House.

It's the story of a legitimate New Jersey businessman who gets himself entwined in the underground world of his Mafia crime boss grandfather.

Which is no stretch for the 50-something Jersey Shore resident, the grandson of Vito Genovese one of the most powerful mobsters in American history -- who controlled chunks of the gambling, loan-sharking and drug businesses of Staten Island.

Phil is far more a product of suburban America than of his grandfather's La Cosa Nostra, however. He was raised at the Shore by his mother and CPA father, usually seeing Don Vito only on Sundays when his grandfather would summon the family for dinner at his simple Atlantic Highlands home.

After graduating from Villanova University in the mid-1970s, the younger Genovese's first real job was at that stalwart of U.S. capitalism Johnson & Johnson. From there, he made a number of stops as an expert in moving cargo around the world.

Now he's with another Fortune 500 outfit, a corporation so huge it has offices in countries some of us have never heard of. He doesn't even like mentioning the company name while publicizing his book for fear of offending the higher ups.

"Separation of church and state," he explains.

But there are flashbacks in his life that are undeniable.

He has a scene early in the very readable new book where the mob boss's young grandson stands on a chair to hand his grandfather ingredients for the tomato sauce that is being painstakingly prepared on the kitchen stove.

"That's a lot like it really was," he says of his childhood days before Vito Genovese was shipped off to federal prison, where he died in the late 1960s.

QUIET CONVERSATIONS

And he recalls vividly his grandfather's aging friends coming by on those Sundays for whispered conversations around cups of espresso. And of Vito's wake at the old Anderson's Funeral Home on Broad Street in Red Bank.

"The black FBI cars were parked across the street with the long camera lenses sticking out the windows," he said.

There were tales from his own father of living in Park Avenue luxury in the 1930s. "He used to see Eleanor Roosevelt on the elevator in his apartment house," said Genovese.

And, maybe through some form of childhood osmosis, Phil learned something from his grandfather's business.

One lesson was that, just as in the legitimate world, in the mob, competency isn't always rewarded and messing up not always punished.

That was very much so in the case of Vincent "The Chin" Gigante.

Long before Gigante began famously roaming Greenwich Village's Carmine Street in bathrobe and slippers, he was a hit man for Don Vito. Needless to say, business was booming.

One day in May 1957, Genovese gave his underling a very important job. He was to travel uptown to the landmark Majestic Apartments on Central Park West. There, he was told he'd find one Frank Costello (real name Francesco Castiglia).

"I want him to disappear," Genovese said of his rival.

The young Gigante waited on the corner of 72nd Street until he saw Costello approaching the building's lobby door.

Chin made his move, firing from close to point-blank range. He was high and wide.

The bullet glanced off Costello's head, grazing him. Instead of imbedding deep into the skull of the fingered mobster, it would smack harmlessly into the marble lobby wall.

The bullet mark is still plain to see above the building entrance 50 years later.

"Botched job," Phil Genovese pointed out the other day. And one that began Don Vito's decline in organized crime.

"Chin screwed up, and what happened? He wound up eventually becoming the boss."

THE FAMILY ENDURES

The Genovese crime family didn't dry up and disappear when Don Vito died.

One of the bosses to follow Genovese was Funzi Tieri, a guy with deep Island connections who was known to be among the biggest bookmakers and loan-sharks in the country.

Once Tieri became the acting boss, you could find him almost daily at a restaurant on Third Avenue in Brooklyn.

One evening, he was met there by two Staten Island lawyers.

The older attorney, I'll call him Morty, had long handled Genovese bookmaking cases in the borough.

On this night, he'd brought a young friend along in hopes Tieri would toss some business to the new guy (who was clearly interested in climbing aboard what he saw as the Mafia gravy train).

Morty and the gangster drank wine and ate pasta and steaks and talked about old times for hours, while the younger attorney sat respectfully silent.

Late into the night, the older lawyer weaved as he was led to the car.

On the ride home to Todt Hill he told his young associate that he thought a good impression had been made.

"Kid," the conversation was remembered years later, "I think if you follow me, you're going to be OK."

The younger lawyer didn't answer.

He rolled to a stop in front of his mentor's house and hustled his rumped associate out of the car as quickly as he could. Then he turned the car around and sped back over the Verrazano to the restaurant.

Tieri was still there when he arrived, and waved the now lone lawyer back to the table.

"What happened kid?" he wanted to know. "Where's your friend?"

"With all due respect, Mr. Tieri" the younger lawyer said, "I don't think Mort is up to doing the job for you anymore. Why don't you hire me, instead?"

And so, Tieri, who always admired a man who could focus on his own best interests, did just that.

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