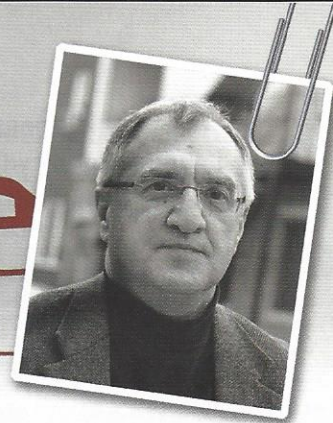


# MobScene

by George Anastasia



It isn't "My Blue Heaven." That's one thing that can be said with certainty after details about the lives of two local mobsters who are now living in the Witness Protection Program surfaced last month. The Steve Martin comedy painted a humorous picture of a gangster's life after he stepped down from the witness stand. In the movie, Martin's character and several other East Coast gangsters are relocated with new identities to sunny Southern California.

"It's a nice day for mow," says Martin's New York wiseguy, dressed in a sharkskin suit and tie, as he pushes a mower across a suburban lawn.

Reality is a little different. Consider the situations that former mob boss Ralph Natale and one-time mob associate Roger Vella now find themselves in. They cast their lot with the federal government, turning on the Philadelphia/South Jersey mob family they were once a part of.

A decade later, it would appear things haven't worked out the way they had hoped.

Natale, 78, was released from prison two years ago. In April he filed a civil suit in federal court in Philadelphia seeking \$10 million in damages from the Justice Department and its minions. The former Pennsauken mobster alleges that he went blind while in prison and that prosecutors and prison authorities ignored his complaints about deteriorating vision.

Among other things, the suit alleges that in 2001, while he was testifying for the government in a mob racketeering case in Philadelphia, Natale's daughter-in-law arranged an appointment with a specialist at the prestigious Wills Eye Hospital. But, the suit contends, the appointment was canceled after a federal prosecutor refused to allow prison authorities and the FBI to transport him there.

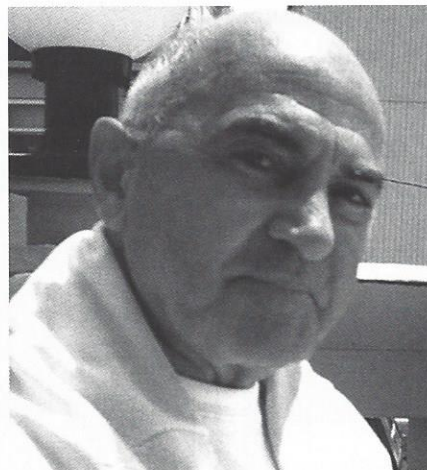
By 2007, according to the suit, Natale's eyesight was gone. The condition stems from a series of retinal problems, including macular degeneration, that went untreated for the nearly thirteen years he spent in prison.

Natale's lawyer, J. Conor Corcoran, argues that his client has suffered "emotional, physical and... psychological injuries of catastrophic severity" that justifies the \$10 million price tag on the damage claim.

Natale is living in an undisclosed location with his wife Lucille. He has limited peripheral vision and is "functionally blind," his lawyer wrote.

That's not the way the former crime boss figured things would play out.

But there are those who might argue that even when his vision wasn't impaired, Natale had trouble seeing what was going on around him. While his decision to cooperate and testify for the prosecution was hailed as a groundbreaking event in the underworld, it brought very few dividends for the government or for



Ralph Natale

the pompous mobster.

From the witness stand, Natale seemed to enjoy his status as one of the few mob bosses in America to become a government informant. That he was boss in little more than name didn't seem to matter to him or to the FBI handlers who got him to flip.

Natale spent nearly two weeks on the witness stand in the 2001 racketeering trial of Joseph "Skinny Joey" Merlino and six co-defendants. Merlino, it would turn out, was the real boss of the family. Natale, who thought he was Don Corleone, was really Uncle Junior.

Most of the information he brought to the

trial was bogus. He talked about hits he and Merlino had ordered, but had no first hand knowledge of who carried them out. In retrospect it appears that Merlino and his associates sold Natale a bill of goods, giving him bad and inaccurate information. Natale, in turn, unwittingly sold the same info to the feds who lapped it up.

The result?

The jury convicted Merlino and his co-defendants of racketeering charges built around allegations of gambling, extortion, loansharking and the receipt of stolen property, charges that had been established and supported with hard evidence before Natale agreed to cooperate.

Of the murders and attempted murders that Natale pontificated about from the witness stand? The jury found none of it had been proven.

Roger Vella flipped while Merlino and the others were on trial, but his only stint on the witness stand was as a prosecution witness in a low-level Philadelphia drug case. The young South Philadelphia mob associate has been debriefed at length, however, about his dealings with Merlino, mobster George Borgesi and nearly a dozen other South Philadelphia wiseguys.

His stories are as grandiose as Natale's. And just as incredible. But that didn't stop the feds from cutting a sweetheart deal.

Vella, 42, pleaded guilty to a 1995 murder that authorities said was linked to his cocaine dealing. Vella, in turn, alleged that the hit was mob ordered and that nearly a dozen wiseguys played a role in either the murder or in cleaning up and disposing of evidence. The victim's body was dumped in a vacant field and set on fire.

No one else has ever been charged.

Vella undermined his own credibility by lying to the FBI during one of his debriefing session, claiming he had been "made," formally initiated, into the mob. A few days later he told the FBI that that wasn't true.

"He's a bed bug," said one former associate who knew Vella when he was on the street. Both Merlino and Borgesi have in the past expressed a similar opinion of the mob informant, but both were also happy to use Vella as an er-

## The couple apparently had a falling out. As a result, she said, Vella “threatened to smash her head with a hammer.”

rand boy and driver and to take advantage of the cash he willingly spread around from his cocaine dealing before he turned snitch.

While he never testified, Vella did get the usual benefits of a cooperator, serving time in a witness protected wing of a federal prison. He did close 12 years for the murder, was released in April of last year, and was given a new identity and relocated.

But today he’s back in jail.

He was hauled into federal court in April for violating the terms of his supervised release. While some of the details are vague, court papers indicate that in December Vella traveled to New York and New Jersey without first obtaining permission from his probation officer. The trip was designed so that he could introduce a young woman he was dating to family members.

The woman is not identified in the court papers, but her story is told in some detail. During the trip, the couple apparently had a falling out. As a result, she said, Vella “threatened to smash her head with a hammer.”

When they returned from the trip, Vella came clean, telling the woman he was a convicted murderer and mob associate.

She broke up with him on April 8.

Over the next three days, Vella called her cell phone 48 times and sent her approximately 108 text messages. She went to the authorities.

“The woman is in fear of her safety,” a government report noted.

Vella was ordered back to jail for eight months.

Not the kind of happy ending we saw in “My Blue Heaven.”

**B**ut a happy ending may be in the works in Collingswood, NJ where another mob associate, Angelo Lutz, continues to rewrite a life story that could be a Steve Martin movie.

Lutz was convicted with Merlino, Borgesi and the others in that 2001 racketeering case. He served nearly eight years in a federal prison. But when he came out he decided to make good on a self-portrait he had sketched for the jury while testifying in his own defense.

“I’m a cook, not a crook,” he said.

Check out the Kitchen Consigliere Café in Collingswood, a restaurant Lutz opened 19 months ago. The menu, Lutz says, is Italian comfort food the way your mother and grandmother used to make.

It works. (Full disclosure, I’m a friend and

have dined often at the establishment).

More important, Lutz appears to be working hard at turning his life around. He doesn’t deny what he was or what he did, but he says his past is not his future.

It’s all about choices, he says.

He chose not to cooperate, stood trial, was convicted, did his time and now is trying to move forward.

“They took the easy way out,” Lutz said of Natale and Vella. “They ran to the government for absolution. Now Ralph is biting the hand that fed him and Roger’s hitting a girl over the head with a hammer.”

The government has given Lutz nothing and he’s happy to have it that way. In fact, the government took more from him, insisting that he pay a \$15,000 fine that was imposed with his prison sentence before he could use any money from loans and mortgages to launch his restaurant business.

“I wonder if Ralph and Roger have paid their fines?” he asked, already knowing the answer. The Kitchen Consigliere Café is a popular spot



Angelo Lutz

in a South Jersey town teeming with good restaurants. Lutz is now talking about moving to a bigger location on Haddon Avenue and about franchising his product.

“I get up and go to work every day,” he said. “I’m trying to use the talent that I wasted in the past to make something good for the future. I’m trying to build a brand.”

It’s not “My Blue Heaven,” but he’s a lot closer to it than either Natale or Vella. ■

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