

MIAMI HERALD
17 July 1983

ARTICLE APPEARED
IN

Triumphs and trials of a mob boss

As rivals eye his turf, an ailing Santo Trafficante may face his first term in an American jail.

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Once, Florida mob boss Santo Trafficante wore hand-tailored suits and expensive hats as he strutted to appearances before grand juries and congressional committees.

Once, he ate at Miami's best restaurants, enjoying spicy dishes, paying the check with \$100 bills.

Now, when Trafficante, at 68, greets visitors, he wears baggy cotton pajamas. He eats bland food and has given up martinis.

Every other day, he puts on a surgical mask, attaches a clear plastic catheter to the valve that's been inserted in his stomach and drains the poisons from his body. His diseased kidneys no longer work.

An era is coming to an end.

Trafficante has long been considered the state's lord master of racketeering, overseeing an empire financed by illegal gambling, loan sharking, extortion and, some say, drugs.

Now he faces trials in Miami and Tampa on separate racketeering indictments. Other mobsters are eyeing his turf.

Santo Trafficante is a very sick man.

He spends his days moping around his daughter's home in Tampa, reading the newspapers, calling doctors and his lawyer when he's bored.

Sometimes he wakes before dawn and reaches for the nightstand, his hand covered with age spots, groping for a bunch of tiny plastic vials. They contain the old man's breakfast: an assortment of multicolored pills.

Trafficante can moan about his health for hours. "He's a hypochondriac," says Frank Ragano, his friend and former attorney.

Others say he is scared of dying, scared of going to jail. Santo Trafficante has never

been locked up in a U.S. prison. Now he faces two racketeering charges. Each carries a maximum sentence of 20 years.

"They are chicken - - - cases," his attorney, Henry Gonzalez, says with a sneer. But Gonzalez is worried. He says his client can't get a fair trial in Tampa. Too much publicity. Too many retired jurors who don't like Italians, he says.

Of a dying breed

Friday, Gonzalez filed 24 motions asking that the Tampa charges be dismissed, that the Justice Department drop "surplus and inflammatory language" from the indictment, that the FBI turn over its tapes. He also filed reports from several physicians who declared that Trafficante is "somewhat confused," "mildly demented," in a "precarious medical condition," too sick to stand trial.

If his doctors and friends are right, Santo Trafficante is dying. If the Justice Department is right, he is using his illness as an alibi.

Trafficante's poor health has spawned speculation about a successor. But Mafia watchers concede that no one in Florida can fill his shoes. For Trafficante is one of the last old-time Mafia dons. He has lived through Prohibition, pre-Castro Cuba, the Lansky era.

He is bright, crafty, street-smart, and he reads books about his political heroes, Richard Nixon and Huey Long. Trafficante, the son of poor immigrants, inherited a Tampa gang from an illiterate father. Then he quietly extended his influence while dodging bullets, buying off local cops and evading the FBI.

"I've been a gambler all my life," Trafficante once told a congressional committee. "I'm used to taking chances."

This is the man who:

- Was recruited by the CIA, at a secret meeting in the Fontainebleau Hotel, to poison Fidel Castro.

- Was used by mob genius Meyer Lansky to protect organized crime's control of Havana's bawdy casinos.

- Was tailed by the FBI to a meeting at Miami International Airport with Washington, D.C., lawyer William Borders. The two men allegedly discussed a plot to bribe U.S. District Judge Alcee Hastings.

- Checked out of a New York hotel an hour after his rival, Albert Anastasia, head of Murder Inc., was shot dead in the hotel's barber chair.

- Traveled to Southeast Asia as the mob's emissary to meetings with some of the world's biggest heroin dealers.

Trafficante is so well insulated that few people understand how this man who reportedly accumulated great wealth can still own an eight-year-old Chevrolet, can display great tenderness to his family but deadly vengeance to his foes, can enjoy the 20th Century's comforts yet live by an arcane, 100-year-old Sicilian code.

'Devoted,' naive

Who is Santo Trafficante?

"An awful lot of people have had their last supper with him," says FBI agent Wendall Hall, who followed Trafficante for years. "He's a [mob] statesman, a general. But we still don't know much about him."

"He's an enigma," says former FBI agent John Ambler.

"He's a devoted father and grandfather," says Trafficante's son-in-law, Dr. Richard Valdes, a Tampa dentist.

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