

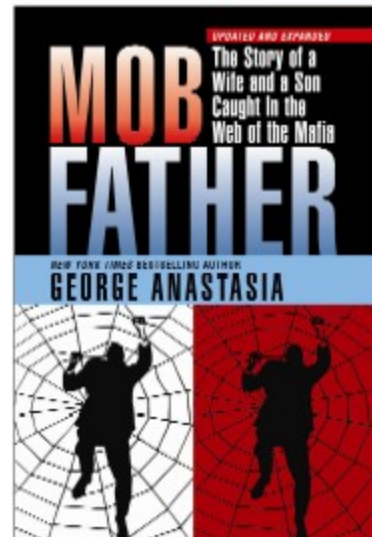
Mobfather

The Story of a Wife and a Son Caught in the Web of the Mafia

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Mobfather—Twelve Years Later

Tommy Del made two trips back to Philadelphia after testifying in the big mob trials that brought down the Scarfo organization. Neither could be considered a triumphant return.



He first came back in January of 1997 to testify in the retrial of the Frankie Flowers murder case. The original 1989 convictions of Scarfo and his codefendants had been overturned by an appellate court panel. Prosecutorial misconduct and trial judge error had unduly influenced the jury in the case, the panel ruled. It was one of several setbacks for the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office, whose record in prosecuting the Scarfo crime family was abysmal.

By the time the retrial began, a lot had changed in Tommy Del's life and in the Philadelphia underworld. Some of it ended up on display in the Common Pleas Courtroom, which was packed each day with family members and friends of the defendants.

For many of them, it was a rare chance to see the defendants, who had been doing their time in federal prisons far from Philadelphia. Scarfo, Salvatore Merlino, Frank Iannarella, Phil and Frank Narducci, and Joe Ligambi all ended up back in town to face murder and murder conspiracy charges. Lawrence Merlino, who had pleaded guilty to a third-degree murder charge as part of his cooperating agreement, was no longer a part of the case. Neither was Nicky Milano, who was severed from the trial as a concession by the District Attorney's Office to make sure that his brother, Gino, would testify again.

Salvatore Merlino's son, "Skinny Joey," was at the trial most days, along with a group of young mobsters who now were major players in the crime family. The younger Merlino was the underboss and the focus of lots of law enforcement

attention. He had taken on celebrity status in the city. A young, John Gotti-like figure, his criminal activities were front-page news, and his nighttime comings and goings were chronicled in the gossip columns.

Young, handsome, and with an arrogant swagger that drove the feds nuts, Skinny Joey had become the new face of the Philadelphia mob. He was the antithesis of the late Angelo Bruno, who had spent his whole career operating in the shadows. Bruno's philosophy—make money, not headlines—had brought twenty-one years of success and stability to the organization. Merlino, who had a higher profile and a much smaller bank account than the old Don, loved the limelight. The Generation-X underboss became a habitu  of the city's trendy restaurants, bars, and nightclubs, usually accompanied by an entourage of young wiseguys, whose fancy clothes and expensive cars signaled a new era in the underworld. Their attitude was typical South Philly street corner: What's the point of being a gangster if nobody knows who you are.

Joey and his group of sycophants and wannabes added extra color to the high-profile trial. One of his top lieutenants, George Borgesi, also was a regular in the courtroom. Borgesi's uncle, Joe Ligambi, was the accused hitman in the case. The wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters of the defendants filled the other seats on one side of the third-floor courtroom. Across the aisle sat Frankie D'Alfonso's widow and their three adult children, a son and two daughters. On most days, they were accompanied by someone from law enforcement.

Tommy Del was the leadoff witness and spent two days on the stand. His hair was grayer. He had gained weight; his face was rounder and fuller than when he had testified in the first trial. There were age lines fanning out around his eyes and creeping across his forehead. But when he opened his mouth, it was like stepping back in time.