

Federal Gun Charges; Gentile To Serve 11 More Months; Museum Art Heist Suspect Sentenced

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FULL TEXT

Robert "The Cook" Gentile, the octogenarian gangster authorities believe could be the last best hope of cracking the half-billion dollar art heist from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, is likely to serve about a year more in a prison hospital after being sentenced Tuesday on federal gun charges.

U.S. District Judge Robert N. Chatigny sentenced the 81-year old mafia soldier to 54 months for gun crimes, one of which involved selling a pistol to a three-time killer who wanted a weapon "to clip that fellow in Maine." Factoring in the 35 months Gentile has been jailed while awaiting sentencing, he could be out in 11 months or so, depending on credit for good behavior.

Chatigny's sentence concluded a rambling and occasionally odd hearing that turned on the long-running dispute between Gentile and federal law enforcement. The FBI believes Gentile, through his affiliation with a Boston-based mafia group, has information that could help agents recover the Gardner Museum art. Gentile stubbornly denies it.

Gentile complained bitterly of the conditions of his imprisonment and said of the state jail in Bridgeport, where he is currently held: "They got rats running around downstairs, eating your food." His prosecution, he said, has left him "crippled." Choked by emotion, he said it also has destroyed his elderly wife's health. His lawyer, A. Ryan McGuigan, accused federal authorities of twisting and misrepresenting secret recordings made by informants to make it appear - falsely - that Gentile had, and perhaps still has, knowledge of what became of the Gardner art.

"I wish you could see it in your heart to let me go home to my wife and maybe give her another six months," Gentile begged Chatigny.

He complained that he was set up by two friends and criminal associates whom the FBI persuaded to cooperate in return for a chance at the museum reward money, now up to \$10 million. Gentile and his lawyer said the informants cajoled him into committing crimes that agents hoped to use to leverage him into disclosing anything he knows about the Gardner heist.

"The government sent those guys in to get me in trouble," Gentile said. "That should account for something. I wasn't looking to do anything bad."

McGuigan said Gentile has been hospitalized three times in the last three years and, at one point, unexpectedly recovered after prison doctors pronounced him hours from death.

"Anybody else would have killed themselves," Gentile said. "They didn't kill me, they just chained me, like a dog. It made me a cripple. It made me an old man. I can't walk."

Seated in his wheelchair, in prison khaki and with his white hair unkept, Gentile pleaded with Chatigny: "My wife," he said, his voice breaking. "That's all I want. Thanks."

Chatigny has presided over a succession of Gentile's cases since 2010 and said the old gangster isn't all bad, but isn't not good enough either to stay out of prison.

"Your love for your wife is genuine," Chatigny said. "You have worked in lawful occupations. But, at the same time, you have continued to engage in serious criminal conduct and you don't really accept responsibility for it. It's evident to me this is just who you are."

Chatigny said he considered a sentence that would have freed Gentile almost immediately. But, the judge said, reflecting on the gun crimes charged against Gentile - crimes committed while he was on what amounts to parole for prior drug and gun crimes - he decided on a longer sentence to be served at federal hospital prison.

Gentile, who has shuttled between East Coast prisons, said has been there before.

"That's the best place I've been," he told the judge. "The place was painted."

Earlier in the hearing, as part of a long argument for Gentile's immediate release, McGuigan accused federal authorities of distorting the recorded conversations its two principal informants had with Gentile in a ways that suggest he is concealing information about the heist.

The recordings have been sealed by the court and not available to the public. But McGuigan, reading from a sealed memo he filed with the court, said recordings he has heard and transcripts he has read show that Gentile repeatedly protested to the informants that he did not know what happened to the stolen art.

McGuigan quoted Gentile, when pressed by the informants, as saying, among other things:

– "My friend died and everything disappeared. ... I have to go find the paintings. You are asking for something that is not even feasible. I have to go out and find the paintings."

– "I got to go to Boston to see that guy. I'd only be guessing."

– "I've been away a long time and I don't know where it is. All the people I used to run with in Boston are dead. I'd have to go to Boston to see that guy."

U.S. Attorney John H. Durham accused McGuigan of "selective reporting of the facts." He said he would not disclose excerpts of the sealed recordings that the government provided to the court in rebuttal. But during previous court proceedings, the prosecution has claimed Gentile was recorded committing himself to a plan to profit by a convoluted plan to return the art to the museum.

Durham also disputed the characterization of Gentile as a feeble old man entrapped by the FBI, and described Gentile as a vigorous career criminal.

During a 2013 imprisonment, Durham said, Gentile bragged to inmates about having involvement with the Gardner heist and was planning new crimes before he was released. In the past, Durham said Gentile has disguised himself in a police uniform when committing home invasions and once tried to steal a marijuana smuggling operation he

thought was being run by a friend and associate who was dying of cancer.

When the FBI searched Gentile's house in 2012 - the first of four searches - agents found police hats, badges, \$20,000 in cash stuffed in a grandfather clock, what a judge called "a veritable arsenal" of weaponry and, significantly, a list of the stolen Gardner pieces accompanied by possible black market prices.

Gentile insisted to The Courant that he did not have any art, but probably obtained the list in connection with a plan to swindle someone who was trying to buy it.

Museum security director Anthony Amore said the hunt for the art will continue, with or without Gentile.

"This continues to be an active and ongoing investigation," Amore said. "Mr. Gentile is but one piece of the puzzle."

Gentile's standoff with the FBI began in 2010, when the widow of one of his mob partners told agents she had been present a decade or so earlier when her husband handed Gentile two of the stolen paintings. The dead partner, Boston gangster Robert Guarente, is the friend referred to by Gentile in one of the excerpts his lawyer cited in court Tuesday.

Gentile and Guarente were associates for years and were members of a Boston-based mafia group that investigators believe obtained at least some of the art from the gang who stole it.

Two now-dead Boston hoodlums, disguised as police officers, bluffed their way into the Gardner museum early on March 18, 1990. Acting with inexplicable violence, they battered frames from gallery walls and tore away canvases. They drove off with 13 pieces, including Vermeer's "The Concert" and Rembrandt's only known seascape, "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee."

Credit: By EDMUND H. MAHONY - emahony@courant.com

Caption: B&W: ROBERT GENTILE, 81, arrives at federal court Tuesday morning in Hartford, where he was scheduled to be sentenced on gun charges. The reputed Connecticut mobster is believed to be the last surviving person of interest in the largest art heist in U.S. history. Federal prosecutors have said they believe Gentile has information about the still-unsolved 1990 heist at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.

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