

MAFIA TURNS SCAREDY-CAT

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FIRST, JUNIOR GOTTI pens a children's book in prison. Then the mob scion shows up at Sunday mass.

Now, federal prosecutors are claiming the Gambinos and the Lucheses - among the most bloodthirsty crime families the city has ever known - are just a bunch of pansies.

What's the Mafia come to?

Consider the trial going on in courtroom 26A of Manhattan Federal Court. There a group of Albanian-led mobsters are accused of crimes committed as they wrested control of Astoria's gambling clubs - and the protection money they generated - from the Luchese family.

Federal prosecutors say gang leader Alex Rudaj, 38, had Gottiesque visions of heading a sixth crime family. They claim on one occasion, he and some pals even pushed their way into Rao's, the exclusive East Harlem eatery, demanded John Gotti's old table - and got it.

"The Gambino crime family simply could not stand in the way of the Rudaj organization, and the Rudaj organization took great pride in that," prosecutor Benjamin Gruenstein said.

He told a jury that when the Gambinos tried to head off the Albanians in a showdown at a New Jersey gas station, they were sent away cowering.

One of Rudaj's henchmen pulled a gun and pointed it at a gas pump, threatening to blow them all away. The leader of the Gambinos, Arnold (Zeke) Squitieri, backed off.

After that, the Rudaj organization moved into Astoria, branching out from their base in the Bronx and Westchester, where they got their start forcing their "Joker Poker" machines on bar owners.

Attorneys for Rudaj and his five co-defendants have mocked the prosecution's theory during the opening weeks of an expected three-month trial. Rudaj's lawyer, James Kousouros, says his client was a legitimate businessman, owner of Morris Park Games, which sells foosball games, pool tables and gambling machines to bars and clubs throughout the city. "The Lucheses and the Gambinos are comprised of hundreds of members who shoot and kill anybody that stands before them and takes a nickel from them," Kousouros told jurors. "The reality is that these six gentleman did not displace two of the most powerful crime families in the world."

Among those on trial is Rudaj's alleged chief enforcer, Nikola Dedaj, gang members Ljusa (Louie) Nuculovic, Prenka (Frankie) Ivezaj and Nardino Colotti, a protégé of the late Gambino family soldier Phil (Skinny Phil) Loscalzo.

All are charged with racketeering, gambling, extortion and loansharking.

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