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## This Week In Gang Land

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By Jerry Capeci

### Mob-tied Loanshark Enjoyed Life On The Run After 'Escape' From 30-Year Prison Term

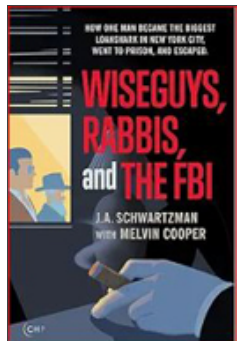


Mel Cooper, born 78 years ago in Brooklyn, is now retired there. In between, the ex-mob associate had an exciting, exhilarating, but sometime depressing life in New York and elsewhere. It includes a 20-month furlough from a 30-year sentence for loansharking when he was released from prison 29 years early by mistake, according to a new book, *Wiseguys, Rabbis and the FBI*.

Seven mob-tied co-defendants, including capos Vincent (James) Rotondo and Benedetto Aloj, were acquitted at trial, rightfully, according to Cooper, then 39, who wasn't. He immediately set out to get far away from the Hauppauge, L.I. courthouse where he'd just been released instead of turned over to deputy U.S. Marshals for a trip back to the federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana.



"I knew instantly that I can't stand there staring at the sky," he recalled in the book co-written by J.A. Schwartzman and Cooper. It was 9:30 AM on May 5, 1986. He had no money or identification, and was dressed in prison khakis with inmate numbers on his pants and shirt. But by 10 p.m., he had a room in a Boston boarding house — and was so excited, he couldn't sleep.



"I lay down on the bed, then I jumped up like a jack-in-the-box and I had to go downstairs, and it was four flights. I had to take a walk in the street because I just couldn't sleep," he stated.

"After hitting a local bar accompanied by a disabled vet he met in the TV room at the boarding house, Mel went to sleep," Schwartzman wrote. About a week later, though, Cooper's taste of freedom took "a nosedive into a state of depression" when he called his appeals lawyer, Thomas Puccio, and he advised Cooper to turn himself in.

"Listening to my attorney say, 'Yeah, turn yourself in for another 29 years.' didn't sound too inviting," said Cooper. What made it worse was how alone he felt.

"I was free," he said, "but I could have just as well been put on Mars and set free. How does someone feel if they're on a planet all by themselves? That's the way I felt in Boston. I didn't know anybody."

He needed what he called a "warm conversation" with someone who knew him. But he couldn't call anyone in New York since the feds were surely looking for him. "So I said to myself, 'I have to speak to someone from my past, from my past life, from my pre-incarceration.'"

Pre-incarceration was before Cooper, his partner in *Resource Capital Group* (RCG,) Jesse (Doc) Hyman, and six others, including Rabbi Chaim Gerlitz, of Great Neck, were found guilty of racketeering and loansharking in April of 1985, when Cooper began his 30-year prison term.



J.A. Schwartzman G L



Vincent Rotondo

The feds didn't know about Patrick Bradley, who had worked for Cooper at RCG years earlier, and who had written sympathetic letters to his former boss after he was housed in Suffolk County in February of 1986 and had given Mel his phone number.

So Cooper called Bradley, and quickly relocated to the Sunshine State, where he enjoyed his life on the run for the next 20 months with Bradley, his girlfriend, and some new friends.

According to *Wiseguys, Rabbis and the FBI*, he used his street savvy and years of expertise in business to help himself and them earn money honestly in the money lending business, as Anthony Parisi.

That was the alias he came up with on May 5, 1986, when an airline agent asked for his name as he paid cash for a flight to Los Angeles from Newark Airport. Back then, getting on a plane was almost as easy as taking a city bus, the book notes. Since his "escape" two hours earlier, the book states, Cooper used collect calls, buses, the LIRR, and the NYC subway to get there with important help from \$5850 in cash collected from his brother and ex-wife.



Jesse Hyman G L

After hitching a ride to the closest LIRR station, Cooper took two trains to get to Jamaica, where the LIRR meets the NYC subway. Once there, he called his brother who met him 10 minutes later in a nearby bar and gave him "a hug" and \$850.

As Cooper turned and headed toward the subway, his brother called out and said: "Hey Mel, tuck your shirt in. Your (prison) number is showing."



Cooper took an E train into the city and met his ex-wife at Ninth Avenue and 37th street, where she gave him \$5000 he had asked her to bring along — money he had given her.

"I told her that in the next few hours I'm going to be leaving the country" and not to lie if the FBI contacts her but to tell "the truth," which he hoped would have the feds looking for him in Israel. "Mel kissed her goodbye and left," the book states.



Cooper On the fence at Terre Haute

An hour later, at 11:30 AM, Cooper, with a ticket to Los Angeles in hand, saw the West Coast flight "didn't leave until 4:40 pm" and decided that sitting around for five hours in an airport was not a good idea. He saw that a Boston flight was about to leave, went back and asked the agent to switch his ticket because his office "wants me to go to a meeting in Boston before California."

"That's no problem, Mr. Parisi," she said, and "handed Mel a ticket to Boston, along with his change," the book states. "The whole transaction had been in cash. She added, "You'd better hurry. They're boarding right now."

After the stressful 12 hours it took him to get from Hauppauge to Boston, getting to Miami and hooking up with Bradley and his girlfriend Monica was a snap. But Miami was "too crowded for Mel's taste" and they found a motel, *The Riviera*, to his liking in Fort Lauderdale, where he made friends with Pam, a pretty Florida native, and Caspar, an out-of-work bartender.

Six weeks in, the motel room began to feel like a cell to Cooper. He rented a one-bedroom apartment with a balcony overlooking the ocean in a building about five blocks away and called *The Seasons*, the book states.

For six months, Cooper said, he "lived like a beach bum." He went to the beach, waterskied with Patrick and Caspar, who had a boat and an SUV that Cooper and his close circle of friends used to get to the clubs, restaurants and a Beach Boys concert on the beach.



Rabbi Chaim Gerlitz

But he felt that his mind was "becoming like mush," Cooper said.



Mel Cooper as Tony Parisi with sons in NYC, 1987

"So I got hold of Caspar and I said, 'Caspar, we're going to start making some money now,'" said Cooper, who told Caspar, a carpenter by trade who knew nothing about the business of lending money, "to follow along as they pitched potential customers and banks."

"Mel told Caspar to start talking to people at the bar and see if there were any business people in the market for money," Schwartzman wrote. "He explained the basics: the borrower would have to have some kind of property for security — a house, a car, a boat.

"Mel would do the rest," the book stated. "He taught Caspar one of his prime lending principles: 'When they need money, they'll do anything for it.' It only took a week for Caspar to come back with a few leads; one man had a house and needed a second mortgage, another wanted a first mortgage."

After 15 years of packaging loans for banks at *Resource Capital* and its predecessor, *Cooper Funding*, which financed garbage trucks for Genovese, Gambino and Luchese mobsters in the waste hauling industry, "Mel knew just what it took to get a bank to say yes," Schwartzman wrote.

"You walk into a company and say 'I'm going to bring you



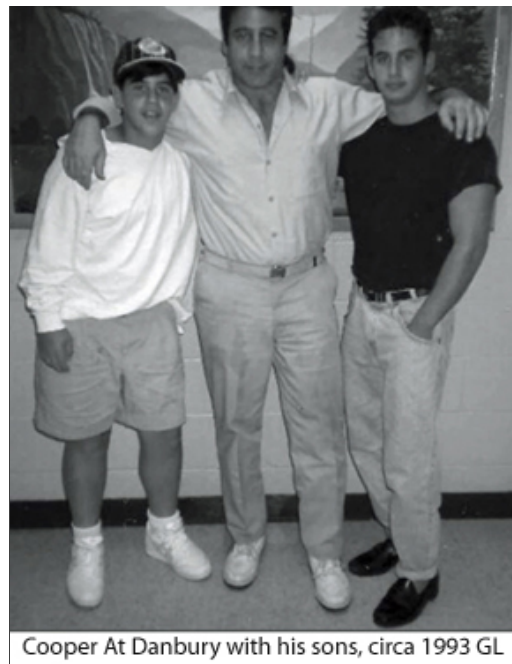
deals,' and they're happy to get the deals," Cooper said. He met the bank manager, he said, and "worked out a deal where we would get a commission on anything I brought her." Cooper was "back in business, and making money," the book stated: "Legitimate money."

As his new life flourished in Florida, Cooper "wanted to see his kids." He missed them and decided in 1987 that the feds wouldn't be looking for him on a train from Florida to New York. When his first trip went well, "every six weeks Mel would head up north" to meet his children "usually in a movie theater in Manhattan in the evening," Schwartzman wrote.

Back in Florida, Cooper, a Cuban doctor named Angel Giraldez who had a "suite of offices on *Calle Ocho*, or Southwest 8th Street" in the Little Havana section of Miami, and Kathy, the bank manager he met working with his friend Caspar, teamed up to form *First Professional Leasing Company*, using the doctor's offices as its headquarters.

Cooper said that since they were "in the heart of Miami" where "most of the population speaks Spanish," and the banks weren't servicing Spanish businessmen and professionals, they decided to focus on them as clients, using about a dozen people that Doctor Giraldez brought in from Cuba, Honduras and other countries for Cooper to train as salespeople.

"All of sudden," Cooper recalls, "everybody starts bringing in doctors and dentists and medical equipment and construction equipment. Kathy didn't know what to do, she couldn't believe it. The money is pouring in, she's making thousands a week, the doctor is making more than he's making as a doctor, and we're really moving along."



Cooper At Danbury with his sons, circa 1993 GL



Thomas Puccio

Things began wonderfully in 1988 for Cooper, who rang in the New Year at *Disney World* with Doctor Giraldez and two Canadian women they met in Fort Lauderdale. But it turned to shit at 6 a.m. a week later when he picked up the phone and an unfamiliar voice said: "This is the FBI. We want you to step out the door right now. We have you surrounded."

"Let me just get dressed, and I'll come to the door," he said before the voice told him to appear as is.

"Wearing just his underwear, Mel went to the door," the book recounted. "As soon as he opened it, he was greeted with the early-morning enthusiasm of at least twenty agents with handguns and rifles pointed at him."

Cooper resumed his 30-year prison term on January 8, 1988. But lawyer Tom Puccio, who had told him to surrender and unknowingly triggered his client's 20 months of freedom, got it reduced to 12 years. After serving eight years behind bars, he was paroled on July 19, 1994.