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THE BOSTON GLOBE • THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1994

Has Dan Rea gone too far?

■ RFA
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when Gary completed his presentation. Rea was intrigued. Soon after that meeting, Rea was spending hours with Gary over lunch and dinner and on the telephone. Rea was so taken with the matter that when he went to Florida with his family on vacation last winter he took a stack of Sabatni legal documents along to read.

To understand the case fully, Rea dove into the intricate details of the brutal murder of Teddy Deagan, a small-time hood who had crossed Mob bosses and was slaughtered in a severe re-enactment of a Martin Scorsese picture. The task of killing Deagan went to a man accomplished in such matters, Joseph (the Assassin) Barbona, who recruited five others to join the killing in a Chelsea alley on the night of March 12, 1965.

No one was charged in the crime, however, until more than two years later when Barbona entered the federal witness protection program. He told authorities that five men besides himself participated in the murder, including Sabatni, who Barbona said had driven one of the getaway cars. On the strength of Barbona's testimony Sabatni and the others were convicted and sent away for life.

A 'smoking gun'

Rea's first story on Sabatni, which aired in May, was exceptionally long for a package on the 11 o'clock news—seven minutes—and made a strong case for Sabatni's innocence.

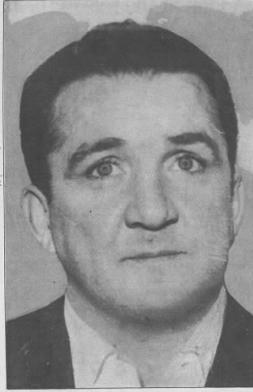
The story advanced Gary's theory that Sabatni had been framed by Barbona to protect his good friend and fellow witness Vincent Flammia, and to get back at Sabatni, who still owed \$500 he had borrowed from Barbona's loan-sharking operation. This theory is based on a document Rea considers the smoking gun in the case: A police report written in the days following the Deagan murder, but that Rea says was not available to the defense at trial.

The police report, which Gary received in 1989, includes a reference to an informant who showed the FBI Telsa, a now defunct restaurant that was a mob hangout in Revere, and returns to the club with a group of men including Flammia. A number of other men named by the informant were convicted in the murder. Nowhere in the report is Sabatni's name mentioned.

The existence of an informant, says Rea, is crucial because the law requires that when there is an informant in a case his or her existence must be revealed to the defense. The prosecution made no mention of an informant during the trial.

In another story, Rea interviewed law detectives who had been at the Ed's Telsa the night of the killing and who said they had not seen Sabatni with Barbona.

But there was one Rea story that stirred out above all others, for it brought to the fore what has the potential to be truly explosive news: evidence on Sabatni's behalf. The story was an interview with Joseph Barbona, a prominent Boston attorney who has represented numerous organized crime figures through the years and who defended one of Sabatni's co-defendants at the original trial. During his interview with Rea, Barbona stated flatly on camera that he was "100 percent convinced that Joseph Sabatni was innocent."



After Edward Deagan, above, was murdered in Chelsea in 1965, Joe Sabatni was named as a getaway driver.

But Martin's word on the matter was far from final. The issue would be decided by Superior Court Judge Robert Banks, who would listen to the arguments from both sides, take time to consider the matter and then issue his judgment. There would be no middle ground: Banks would vindicate Rea's representation of the case, or he would reject it.

Both sides waited anxiously for the judge's ruling.

Prodding the DA

Throughout last summer and into the fall there was an air of urgent expectation about Rea's stories. Sabatni filed a motion for a new trial which, if granted, would have meant his freedom. Rea's stories conveyed a notion that Sabatni's release was imminent.

Prosecutors opposed the vast majority of motions for new trials, but in this case, Martin wanted to probe deeply into the case before deciding what to do. Rea's reporting had had a clear impact on the DA.

"My sense was that Dan Rea seems to be behind in, there really could be something here, because I hadn't seen him out on a limb like that before," says Martin.

Three officials in Martin's office, assistant DA Robert McKenna and two police investigators—immured

themselves in the case for four months. While the investigation proceeded, Rea pressed his case. Rea hoped, and, for a time, expected—that Martin would trial up supporting Sabatni's motion for a new trial. But those hopes were dashed last fall when Martin, McKenna and other officials reviewed the evidence and decided to vigorously oppose Sabatni's motion.

The DA concluded that Sabatni had received a fair trial initially, that the information contained in the supposedly longest police report had been available to defense lawyers at trial and that the significance of the informant was vastly outweighed by the defenses.

"It was not a close call," Martin says of his decision.

From 1971 into 1975, Rea contributed a regular column to the Globe stating out conservative positions on a wide variety of social, political and economic topics. In his writings, Rea criticized Richard Nixon as an insufficiently committed to conservatism, supported conservative Rep. John Ashbrook of Ohio against Nixon in the New Hampshire primary in 1972, demonstrated against George McGovern; organized a rally to support American POWs and opposed amnesty, affirmative action and gun control.

Rea wrote in his column that in the United States "the lower class has the platiest welfare structure in the history of the world," that "the only political prisoners in the United States today are the Watergate '73," and he proposed shifting UN head-

quarters to China and turning the UN complex in New York into a "condominium for double-breasted businessmen and ghetto families."

Rea's trademark—a stammer-determination, a refusal to back down when he believes he is right—was never more evident before the Sabatni case than when Rea, at the age of 22, took on the venerable Cardinal Richard Cushing, then archbishop of Boston and one of the most beloved figures in the city's history. For an Irish Catholic boy from a Boston neighborhood this bordered on sacrilege.

A news story in April 1970 quoted Rea as attacking Cushing for an Easter message that called for amnesty for jailed war protesters and draft evaders. At the time, Cushing was ill in the hospital, and Rea was quoted as saying: "If he did in truth make these statements, then the cardinal is a lot sicker than he realizes."

The years 1971 through 1975, when he served on the national board of directors of Young Americans for Freedom, were a heady time for Rea. But he was not inclined to set aside that work for journalism. "Those were very confrontational times," he recalls. "People tended not to reason intellectually. There was a lot of physical confrontation, taking over desks' offices, shutting down campaigns. I took posi-

tions essentially consistent with the concept of academic freedom. It was not a popular position to have to be quite honest—a conservative campus activist. We were dealing with the Washburns, frankly, whose behavior was unpredictable. There were some real screwballs around."

For all his fire as a conservative activist and commentator, Rea's road drum had been to become a sportsman. Between his sophomore and junior years in college, Rea visited Bob Starr, who was then the WEEZ-TV sports anchor. "I went to the station and talked to him about being a sportsman, and his advice to me was to get rid of my New England accent and to go to journalism school in the middle of the country," says Rea. On Starr's recommendation, Rea applied to the journalism program at the University of Tulsa. "I put my money down to go to the University of Tulsa, and at the last moment, I decided not to."

Why? "I guess I was intimidated by the thought of being halfway across the country," he says.

Stirrhisms at 'BZ
He is not known as a man who chickens out of anything. He does not back down from conflict, even when it is in his own work place. Currently, there is a dispute within the Channel 4 newsroom in which some members of APTRA (the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) want to break with the union and establish their own in-house union. Rea led the dissidents, who are angry about steep dues increases and other issues. Of the 70 APTRA members, 44 now side with him.

Rea also got into a beef with news anchor Liz Walker last August. Rea had done a story on parahumans that showed two examples of people parachuting, both black. Part of the point of the story was to air the view of a social critic who advised people not to give to parahumans, because, he said, too many of them turned around and used the money for drugs. Walker was furious, saying that the story portrayed stereotypes, and she confronted Rea in the newsroom.

In an angry exchange, Walker told Rea that he was "either naive or a racist," Rea recalls.

Rea replied that he'd grown up in an environment where he'd been racism firsthand and that he was no racist. He also said that he and the photographer had found only two parachuters the night they shot the story and both happened to be black.

Within days of the incident, both Walker and Rea say, they had patched over their differences.

During an interview, Rea does not mention his past acts on the issue of race, but old newspaper clippings reveal that when he was a



Dan Rea, right, and Joe Sabatni confer in the visitors' room at Bay State Correctional Institution.

Rosville, Boston Latin School, Boston State College and BU Law. He has lived and worked here all his life.

For a time, before he became a reporter, it appeared Rea was on a political track. For a number of years, in fact, he was one of the most outspoken young conservatives in Boston. As an undergraduate at Boston State, Rea worked for the Nixon-Agnew ticket in 1968, and while a law student at BU, Rea hosted a weekly talk program on WEEZ radio. Later he did a weekend program on WEEZ radio.

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