

## **Arsenic and No Lace:**

# **The Bizarre Tale of a Philadelphia Murder Ring**

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On October 27, 1938, Ferdinand Alfonsi, a poor Italian day laborer, lost a two-month struggle with toxemia and died in Philadelphia's National Stomach Hospital. Normally, such an event would have received attention only from grieving family and friends. But Alfonsi's toxemia was not normal, since the autopsy report revealed that his body was saturated with arsenic, a substance commonly used as rat poison. Michael Schwartz, Anthony Franchetti, and Samuel Riccardi, three Philadelphia police detectives investigating similar deaths, examined the autopsy results with great interest, since it confirmed their suspicion that Alfonsi's death was neither an isolated incident nor accidental. Alfonsi, they believed, was the victim of an organized arsenic murder ring operating in Philadelphia and preying on hapless Italian immigrants.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next fifteen months, the Philadelphia police and the District Attorney's office uncovered an intricate, bizarre tale of conspiracy, serial murder, fraud, witchcraft, and even Satanism centered in Philadelphia's Italian community. Responsible for the deaths of an estimated fifty to one-hundred people in three states, the arsenic ring employed an unusual method in selecting its victims. Typically, its members, posing as faith healers/witch doctors, would offer services to vulnerable and superstitious Italian immigrants seeking medical or spiritual care. After securing a person's confidence, the ring member would insure that individual's spouse or relative, poison the target, and collect money from the insurance policies after the victim died. Although police detectives understood the arsenic ring's poison-for-profit motive, they quickly discovered that bringing the organization to justice would not be an easy task.

### **Discovering the Arsenic Ring**

The initial source of information for detectives regarding the ring was George Myer, owner of an upholstery cleaning business. In June 1938, Myer, recently released from jail and needing \$25 to start his business, approached 40-year-old spaghetti salesman Herman Petrillo for a loan. Petrillo instead offered him his choice of \$600 cash or \$2,500 in counterfeit dollars if he would kill Alfonsi by hitting him in the head with a lead pipe and throwing him down a flight of stairs. Petrillo explained to him that the death must resemble an accident so that a double indemnity premium could be collected from Alfonsi's insurance company. Myer accompanied Petrillo to the Alfonsi household, but ultimately refused to commit the crime. He later approached

the Philadelphia police regarding Petrillo's murder proposal, but they ignored him, believing that he suffered from an over-active imagination.<sup>2</sup>

Frustrated by the police department's unwillingness to investigate Petrillo, Myer contacted William A. Landvoigt, head of the United States Secret Service branch in Philadelphia. Although skeptical about Myer's story, Landvoigt discovered that Petrillo was wanted for counterfeiting and bootlegging and assigned agent Stanley B. Phillips to the case. Phillips, who established his cover as a professional assassin, met with Petrillo and told him he would be willing to fulfill the contract. The two conspirators discussed various methods of murdering the Italian laborer, including drowning him, hitting him with an automobile, bludgeoning him with a metal pipe, or preferably a sandbag that supposedly left little or no trace of impact and resembled a brain hemorrhage. Petrillo allegedly had already supplied Myer with a tailored black sandbag for the occasion.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the method he chose to kill Alfonsi, Phillip's primary objective was to solicit counterfeit money from Petrillo. While agreeing to fulfill the contract on Alfonsi in exchange for \$500, Phillips simultaneously attempted to buy counterfeit currency. Petrillo, however, had problems in securing additional counterfeit money, delaying the deal for three weeks. During the transaction, Phillips pressed Petrillo about the Alfonsi contract. The pasta dealer informed Phillips and Myer that the murder would no longer be necessary because Alfonsi had been admitted to the hospital and was seriously ill. Myers quoted Petrillo as stating "The —— [expletive deleted in source] must have nine lives because we gave him enough arsenic to kill six men."<sup>4</sup>

Secret Service agents remained dubious about the murder conspiracy, but they arrested Petrillo and charged him with counterfeiting. By this time, however, Philadelphia detectives Schwartz, Franchetti, and Riccardi had learned of Myer's story, and arrested the spaghetti salesman again on September 27 for attempted murder. Alfonsi's wife, Stella, had been arrested as well, but the police were forced to release the pair after they failed conclusively to establish their guilt at a magistrate's hearing. Ferdinand Alfonsi's death one month later provided the necessary evidence against the couple and police arrested them a second time. Philadelphia District Attorney Charles F. Kelley assigned Assistant District Attorney (ADA) Vincent P. McDevitt to work on the case with the Philadelphia detectives. Their collaborative investigation soon uncovered the couple's motive when they discovered that Mrs. Alfonsi was the beneficiary of several policies from the Home Life Insurance Company totaling \$8,250. Curiously, the detectives learned from interviews with Alfonsi just before his death that he had been unaware of owning any insurance. He had applied for coverage several times, but each time a response arrived in the mail, his wife informed him he had been rejected. Alfonsi was in no position to question his wife's veracity since he was unable to read English.<sup>5</sup>

## The Investigation

After the arrests of Petrillo and Mrs. Alfonsi, the police and the District Attorney's office continued piecing together the details from the other cases and began comparing evidence. As more detectives were assigned to assist in the rapidly expanding investigation, ADA McDevitt directed the team to study the individual arsenic cases for evidence from three different perspectives: patterns in the insurance policies of the deceased, similarities in their illnesses or injuries, and chemical analyses of the corpses. To confirm the insurance hypothesis, he contacted every insurance company in Philadelphia for information on deceased policyholders thought to be victims of the ring. Although none of the attending physicians or coroners in these cases had listed the causes of death as suspicious, McDevitt hoped that further scrutiny would reveal evidence to the contrary. Eager to recoup money paid out to beneficiaries, the insurance companies supplied the requested material and assigned six investigators to assist in the investigation.<sup>6</sup>

After examining the insurance files, McDevitt, the city detectives, and the insurance investigators determined that the suspected ring victims had all held several separate policies, each written by different agents representing different companies. On further inquiry, the detectives discovered from the insurance agents who had issued the policies that Herman Petrillo or his cousin Paul Petrillo had usually directed them to the victims. Other interesting patterns also emerged from the files. For example, the attending physicians had typically classified the deaths of normal policyholders as one of three illnesses: pneumonia, gastro-enteritis, or heart attack. On the other hand, if the insured happened to own a policy with a double indemnity clause, the subject's death was usually more violent.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, the results of Ferdinand Alfonsi's autopsy report furnished the answers to the illness pattern—large amounts of arsenic were present in his corpse. Because arsenic is an inorganic metallic compound, it is virtually undetectable when slipped in someone's food or drink. While minute traces of arsenic are always present in the body, larger quantities are extremely lethal. After a person ingests the poison, it accumulates in most of the body's vital organs, including the stomach, lungs, liver, and kidneys. As the various organs become engorged, their tissue degenerates which can result in abdominal distension and inflammation, lung congestion, fever, diarrhea, and, of course, excruciating pain.<sup>8</sup>

Although the ring members believed that arsenic was a "miracle drug" because of its deadly effects and the ease of secretly administering it to a victim through food or drink, they failed to consider that the poison is a metallic substance that will not decompose. Police, therefore, only had to exhume the remains of suspected victims and submit them to chemical analysis to find the incriminating physical evidence vital to their case. To facilitate the investiga-

tion and aid its coordination, McDevitt arranged for a team comprised of physicians, chemists, pathologists, toxicologists, and even undertakers to work closely with the police investigators.<sup>9</sup>

### The Indictments

The particular lead that exposed another of the ring's leadership concerned the questionable death of 17-year-old Philip Ingrao who had reportedly died of pneumonia on June 26, 1938. In addition to insurance agents identifying Ingrao's name as one of the customers referred to them by Herman Petrillo, the police were also suspicious because of a statement that Petrillo had made to Myer about doing "a job on a boy."<sup>10</sup>

In the course of their investigation, the detectives found that Ingrao and his father, 41-year-old Charles Ingrao, who had also died of pneumonia on August 8, 1935, were linked through a 45-year-old woman named Carina Favato. Favato, known as the "Philadelphia witch" because of her magic remedies, was stepmother to Philip Ingrao and wife of Charles Ingrao. On October 29, the detectives had the body of Philip Ingrao exhumed for analysis. Tests revealed large amounts of arsenic within the corpse, leading police to order the arrest of Favato on November 2. The bodies of Charles Ingrao and Giuseppe di Martino, who also had died of pneumonia under Favato's care, were exhumed November 23, and test results in mid-December showed large quantities of arsenic in both corpses.<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, detectives studying the insurance files reported to McDevitt that a connection existed between certain suspected victims and the agents who had handled their cases. The same agents had written the policies in each instance. This pattern naturally gave priority to those insurance cases handled by these agents. As this information was added to the growing mass of evidence, the investigations into the first three deaths almost seemed to be complete—with only two vitally important problems. Aside from the physical arsenic traces, most of the evidence was circumstantial, and the police did not know who was the actual person responsible for each death.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, on February 1, 1939, McDevitt brought Petrillo, Alfonsi, and Favato before a coroner's jury. For three days, McDevitt presented evidence from the three perspectives of the investigation—insurance, medical, and chemical—setting a standard strategy he would use for the numerous upcoming arsenic ring trials in the following months. Arsenic traces in a murder victim, supplemented by evidence of multiple insurance policies and testimony by cooperative insurance agents and physicians, established the basis of the prosecution's case against most defendants. The evidence proved convincing to the coroner's jury; at the conclusion of the inquests, it deliberated less than eight minutes before returning a verdict directing the three ring members be held without bail for a grand jury on murder charges.

Following the coroner's jury, the police continued their search for others involved in the plot, but the refusal of the ring members already in custody to reveal what they knew about their accomplices impeded the investigation. Nevertheless, they pursued all leads, however inconsequential, and opened new avenues of inquiry. A series of forgeries in the insurance records not linked to Petrillo led police to theorize that he was not the real leader of the ring. Responding to an informant's tip, McDevitt and detectives traveled to Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, New York, to interview John Cacopardo, a 28-year-old convict who allegedly had information about the arsenic syndicate's mastermind.<sup>13</sup>

Cacopardo was serving a 30-year-sentence for fatally shooting his girlfriend in December 1936. During the interview, he revealed information about the arsenic ring that would later prove critical to its investigation and prosecution. On February 10, 1939, in an unprecedented use of the Interstate Witness Act which previously only had been used for citizens that were *sui juris*, Cacopardo was temporarily released from Sing Sing into McDevitt's custody for a thirty-day leave so that he could be taken back to Philadelphia for further questioning.<sup>14</sup>

On February 11, Cacopardo testified before the Central Police Court against the newest suspect, his uncle Paul Petrillo. Rumored to be the "evil genius" of the arsenic ring, Petrillo, a Philadelphia tailor, had been arrested by police three days earlier after Cacopardo told McDevitt about his uncle's participation in the murder plot during the interview at Sing Sing.<sup>15</sup> Cacopardo's testimony before the Court revolved around the details of Petrillo's past efforts to recruit him into the ring. He accused his uncle of framing him for his girlfriend's murder because of his knowledge about the arsenic ring and Petrillo's involvement.<sup>16</sup>

Even though Cacopardo's testimony connected Paul Petrillo with the arsenic ring, the police had no other evidence against him. Immediately after Petrillo became a suspect, they installed a wiretap on the telephone of one of his girlfriends, though phone conversations revealed nothing incriminating. Until corroborative proof could be established, the case was simply one person's accusations against another. Worse, the police prematurely arrested Petrillo because they had misinterpreted McDevitt's orders. The arresting detectives also had failed to find any evidence, such as insurance policies recently taken out on potential victims, in Petrillo's tailor shop. McDevitt tried to salvage the situation by charging him with conspiracy to commit murder.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this setback, the addition of Cacopardo's revealing testimony enabled the investigative team to open new avenues of inquiry and expand their list of suspects. Cacopardo's statements supported the prosecution's continuing case against Herman Petrillo, Carina Favato, and Stella Alfonsi that McDevitt had been busily preparing. Following an almost repeat presenta-

tion of the testimony at the previous coroner's jury, a grand jury on February 17 returned fourteen indictments against the trio which included fifty counts of murder, conspiracy, and fraud after only ten minutes of deliberation and ordered them held without bail.<sup>18</sup>

The coroner's jury indicted Paul Petrillo on conspiracy as well, even though the only tangible evidence against him was Cacopardo's testimony. The presiding magistrate attempted to hold Petrillo without bail for the grand jury but his attorney introduced a writ of habeas corpus before the court and he was freed on \$7,500 bail. Nevertheless, his release was not a total loss as it provided police and insurance investigators with a new opportunity for surveillance to gather more information against the ring.<sup>19</sup>

### The Prosecution's Preparation

With the initial grand jury indictments, the trials of the numerous arsenic defendants quickly opened and proceeded rapidly. Still, the sheer number of the cases took the Philadelphia court system nearly a year to adjudicate. Fortunately, McDevitt's extensive preparation within the few weeks preceding the first trial enabled him to effectively manage the hectic schedule and successfully prosecute most of the arsenic defendants. The task before the prosecutor was especially challenging, since the nature of the poison crime made securing a conviction in such cases an extremely difficult process. There are usually no witnesses and the evidence against a suspect is purely circumstantial, even when corroborated with physical evidence.

McDevitt formulated an effective strategy to deal with the challenge presented by the arsenic cases, investigating every poison case brought before the Philadelphia courts since 1905 that had resulted in an acquittal. As a result of his meticulous examination of these cases, he discovered that the prosecutors invariably had presented ample physical evidence against each defendant, but they had made two errors. They did not establish what quantity of arsenic actually kills a human, and they failed adequately to protect the corpse from contamination during each step of the autopsy.<sup>20</sup>

Determined not to repeat the same mistakes committed by earlier prosecutors, McDevitt devised several procedures, which everyone involved with disinterring and examining the remains had to follow throughout the course of the investigation. Samples from the clothing and embalming fluid from the corpse, the wood of the coffin, and the soil and water at the gravesite were collected and subjected to chemical analysis. As the physicians performed the actual examination of the corpse, McDevitt ordered them to take special precautions, wearing rubber gloves for the tests and carefully sterilizing any container or surface that the subject would touch, to avoid any possible contamination.<sup>21</sup>

McDevitt's investigative procedures were extremely thorough and augmented his case against the arsenic murderers, but the overwhelming number of exhumations and subsequent studies soon overloaded the Philadelphia's Coroner's office. In May 1939, J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), responded to the situation by offering the agency's laboratory facilities to the Philadelphia examiners for the processing of the excess corpses. The FBI also was able to render assistance in apprehending two arsenic ring fugitives, but it was limited to a strictly supportive role since the murders did not fall under federal jurisdiction. Documents secured under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and individuals such as Judge Harry S. McDevitt (no relation to ADA McDevitt) still tried to convince Hoover to investigate the poison deaths. The director politely refused the requests, explaining the FBI's jurisdictional restrictions.<sup>22</sup>

### **Trials and Revelations**

All four of the charged arsenic members pleaded not guilty, and the case against the first defendant, Herman Petrillo, went before Judge McDevitt on March 14. During the trial, insurance representatives offered damaging testimony against Herman Petrillo and Carina Favato. They identified Petrillo as the individual who directed them to solicit four of the poisoned victims for insurance—a statement that Petrillo vehemently denied. They also named Favato as the beneficiary on some of the policies and quoted her as stating that she made her living from insurance benefits. Later, the insurance agents linked Petrillo with another murder in addition to that of Ferdinand Alfonsi, accusing him of drowning an elderly crippled man named Raphael Caruso in the Schuylkill River. After Caruso's body had been discovered, Petrillo allegedly had attempted to claim the money from several policies on the deceased. Although the Caruso murder was not immediately pertinent to the case against Petrillo, it would become an important factor to his eventual prosecution.<sup>23</sup>

When the defense called Petrillo to the stand, he repeatedly denied each of the charges and accusations listed against him during an intense three-hour examination. He asserted that he had innocently directed insurance agents to the Alfonsi household and that it was Meyer, the Secret Service informer, who actually had suggested that they murder someone for insurance money. The jury was not convinced. On March 22 it returned a guilty verdict with the surprising recommendation that Petrillo be sentenced to death. Enraged by what he perceived as a miscarriage of justice, Petrillo attempted to attack the jury, and he had to be restrained by four bailiffs who physically led him from the courtroom.<sup>24</sup>

While Herman Petrillo had been on trial, the police had been arduously investigating his cousin Paul Petrillo. The evidence they gathered, combined with incriminating testimony presented during Herman Petrillo's trial, con-

vinced Judge McDevitt to charge him and Susie di Martino (wife of Guiseppe di Martino) with murder, conspiracy, and fraud, and to hold them without bail. After Paul Petrillo's arrest, the police unknowingly had almost the entire arsenic leadership in custody with only one more major figure still at large.<sup>25</sup>

With five suspects in custody, the police sought to arrest more ring members, especially the unknown architect behind the plot. They uncovered many pieces of information about the arsenic ring but still did not realize the full extent of the organization or its activities. Their situation quickly changed when Carina Favato's trial opened on April 18. Although the "Philadelphia witch" was implicated in three deaths, ADA McDevitt chose to prosecute the widow on the single charge of murdering Pietro Stea. This strategy allowed him two more opportunities to secure a conviction if the jury found her innocent of the first charge.

Again, the testimony closely resembled that of the previous hearings, until one of the witnesses provided a surprising twist that subsequently affected the entire on-going arsenic ring investigation. On the third day of the proceedings, Susie di Martino's attorney suddenly announced that his client was planning to turn state's evidence against Favato. After hearing di Martino's damaging testimony on the following day, Favato responded by pleading guilty to all charges against her, including the three murder indictments. She added that she would also testify against other syndicate members, a move that finally began to unlock the secrets of the arsenic ring.<sup>26</sup>

The police knew that Favato's forthcoming information offered them the opportunity to learn more about the arsenic organization—knowledge that threatened ring members still at large. Immediately following the news of Favato's confession and planned cooperation, her son Joseph Pontorelli received messages stating that he would be killed unless he personally visited his mother and convinced her to change her mind. Detectives moved him to a secret location, but someone still managed to telephone him and send him threats through the mail. Nevertheless, Favato cooperated with investigators primarily because she was desperate to avoid the electric chair. During a five-hour session with ADA McDevitt and Detectives Schwartz and Franchetti, she revealed everything she knew about the arsenic ring, providing enough information "to hang about a dozen men."<sup>27</sup>

### Understanding the Arsenic Ring

Favato's disclosure persuaded Herman Petrillo to divulge what he knew about the murder plot as well, initiating a chain of arrests which gradually culminated in the capture of the majority of the known arsenic organization. The suspects' statements resulted in media headlines on April 26 and 27 claiming that at least seventy-five more people were involved in the syndicate. Three days after the pair's interrogation police made eight additional arrests and



planned for seventeen more by the end of the following week. Detectives revised the initial estimate of approximately ten to twelve victims to “somewhere between 30 and 70” with the potential for many more.<sup>28</sup> They also finally identified the apparent architect of the ring as Morris “The Rabbi” Bolber, a spiritualist expert who was a known associate of Paul Petrillo. Bolber voluntarily surrendered himself to police on May 1, stating his innocence and offering them “valuable information.”<sup>29</sup> The wealth of information supplied by Favato, Herman Petrillo, and Bolber enabled McDevitt’s investigative team to truly understand the organization and methodology of the arsenic ring for the first time since the beginning of the case.

The media speculated that the actual model for the ring was based on the operations of the Sicilian Camorra, a secret organization of Italian criminals more commonly known in America as the Mafia or the Black Hand Society. No hard evidence ever substantiated this conjecture, though two of the ring members were active in the Black Hand. The arsenic ring appeared to be much more loosely organized than the Camorra. Cacopardo compared the ring to “a social fellowship group, like a sewing circle or bingo club.”<sup>30</sup> Although ring members were not reluctant to use violence to achieve their goals, their organization lacked the hierarchy and internal rules and regulations of the Camorra. The ring also lacked the Camorra’s longevity, and it dissolved when its leadership was jailed.<sup>31</sup>

The detectives understood that the ring members used poison as their primary means of murder, but they also learned that in certain situations—such as when the ring’s poison supplies had temporarily run out—some murders were made to appear as accidental deaths. This led the police to reopen and examine past cases which involved suspicious deaths, including hit and run accidents, apparent suicides involving jumpers, overdoses, hangings, and accidental falls.<sup>32</sup>

Investigators were also able to finally establish the arsenic ring’s *modus operandi*. Generally, the members of the ring targeted vulnerable people and exploited their situation. For example, women who were discontented with their marriages often went to spiritualists such as Paul Petrillo, Favato, and Bolber, who at first performed magical rituals and gave them simple folk medicines to use on their spouses and improve their marital relationships. When these remedies failed, one of the advisors would casually suggest curing their husbands with *la fatura*, or an arsenic substance, which was available for approximately \$300. Although some of the wives knew the *la fatura* was really a deadly poison, others had been told that it was actually a stronger love potion that was potentially fatal. After the husband died, the widow maintained her silence for fear that she would be indicted as an accomplice in murder since she had prior knowledge of the substance’s possible effects.<sup>33</sup>

If a wife was opposed to the suggestion of murder, one of the Petrillos might try to seduce her and extend the offer again after the extortionist had won her affection and trust. In some situations the ring members resorted to more persuasive measures, such as trying to intimidate some of the more superstitious people with talk of their awesome spiritual powers or evoking *malocchio*, or the "evil eye," against them, literally frightening them into participation. Occasionally the opportunity for other more drastic means of coercion presented itself. Women who had become unintentionally pregnant would sometimes consult Bolber who referred them to the group's obstetrician and gynecologist, Dr. Horace Perlman. Dr. Perlman would perform illegal abortions for his clients and then threaten to expose them unless they became involved in the insurance scheme.<sup>34</sup>

The arsenic ring offered its clients a variety of options for killing their family members. For those who wished to kill their relatives but did not want to do it personally, the ring would perform the job. Persons not having enough money to pay for *la futura* or the ring's other services could be finance the deal through insuring his or her spouse—all of which could be accomplished without the spouse's knowledge. If they already had insurance but not enough to make a nice profit, the arsenic ring would increase it. If a husband could not be convinced or tricked into signing the policies, one of the Petrillos would impersonate him before the insurance agent. In some cases, agents who became ring members or, conversely, ring members who became insurance agents such as Herman Petrillo eliminated these steps completely and simply wrote the policies in the back room of Paul Petrillo's tailor shop. In other situations, they used out-of-state mail-order insurance companies to insure their intended victims.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to having its own insurance agents, the arsenic ring also had its own network of doctors, undertakers, henchmen, and poison procurers. It was loosely split into two main sections, North Philadelphia and South Philadelphia (Market Street served as the demarcation line), and reputedly had branches in Delaware, New Jersey, and New York. Originally, the ring "serviced" Philadelphia as a single organization, but disagreements among members over the sharing of profits forced its division. Morris Bolber, Herman Petrillo, and his secretary Rose Carina, another arsenic widow who poisoned three, perhaps four, of her husbands, operated the North Philadelphia branch while Paul Petrillo and Carina Favato were in charge of the South Philadelphia branch. They basically still worked in unison since they all were dependent upon each other, whether for a new supply of poison or assistance in securing insurance or other services for a particular client.<sup>36</sup>

The leads disclosed during the interrogations of Favato and Petrillo gave ADA McDevitt and the other investigators the necessary evidence to capture many of the ring members involved in the plot. Following their arrests,

McDevitt devised a special strategy to make the witnesses as cooperative as possible to insure that they were supplying all of their knowledge about the arsenic ring. He generally based his plan on three assumptions: making the prisoners comfortable with their surroundings and interrogators, rewarding them for providing important information, and showering them with flattery.<sup>37</sup>

The first ring members arrested initially remained quiet until after Herman Petrillo's trial and Carina Favato's confession when, under the pressure of the mounting evidence, they decided to cooperate in an effort to save themselves from the electric chair. As each additional member was captured, they usually followed this pattern, especially since the people already in custody were supplying information on everybody else. Occasionally, some suspects were still reluctant to expose all of their knowledge of the syndicate's operations. McDevitt later explained that "[b]y treating each suspect with the attitude his personality required, we quickly gained their confidence and facetiously made them a member of the investigating staff to aid the detectives in clearing up the details of the particular case they happened to be involved in."<sup>38</sup>

The detectives took some of the arsenic ring suspects on special excursions to restaurants, bars, parties, and family gatherings to gain their confidence. When the *Philadelphia Inquirer* revealed the favors being given to the prisoners, police officials defended their techniques, stating that they were completely successful and enabled them to obtain solid information under less stressful circumstances—without the use of "third-degree methods." In fact, many of the interrogation sessions resembled a friendly class reunion as ring members were occasionally brought together by interrogators to clarify each individual's exact role in matters. They usually seemed genuinely pleased to see each other, and they freely detailed what the police needed to know.<sup>39</sup>

Although some confessions were obtained with little effort, convincing other suspects to talk sometimes required more unique solutions. For example, to persuade Dr. Horace Perlman to confess, the investigative team resorted to a more deceptive approach than had been previously employed. The police knew through Bolber that Perlman was responsible for the murder of Jennie Pino, yet they needed a corroborating witness for a conviction. Bolber told detectives that Pino's husband, Joseph, had requested the arsenic ring's services and had actually witnessed Perlman prescribing the poisoned pills for Jennie. However, this lead quickly disappeared when they discovered that Joseph Pino died that afternoon.<sup>40</sup>

The police had already arrested Perlman and, naturally, he refused to confess, proclaiming his innocence. Time was running out for the investigative team to secure a confession from Perlman since his lawyer was busy trying to win his client's release on a writ of habeas corpus. While delaying Perlman's attorney by keeping the suspect's location hidden, McDevitt and Captain James Kelly decided to implement a new strategy to persuade him to confess.<sup>41</sup>

Since McDevitt and Kelly knew all of the circumstances surrounding Pino's death from Bolber, they first coached Detective Samuel Riccardi on how to imitate Joseph Pino's voice under Bolber's direction and then placed Perlman in a police lineup. Bright lights shone directly on the stage where the suspects stood, making the audience section dark from Perlman's perspective and keeping him from knowing exactly who was in the room. Bolber spoke first and identified the doctor as the man who gave Jennie Pino the arsenic. Kelly then called for Joseph Pino. Detective Riccardi appeared, repeated Bolber's identification, and ended by shouting "there's the man that murdered my wife, I paid him and Paul Petrillo. He gave me the pills. Oh! Why did I ever kill Jennie?" The deception worked; a visibly shaken Perlman immediately signed a confession.<sup>42</sup>

Some of the methods employed by the Philadelphia police would be unconstitutional by current standards since the Supreme Court in *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966) determined that confessions are not admissible in court unless the suspect is properly warned about his rights; however, in 1939 no such protections existed. The authorities obviously had greater latitude when interrogating suspects, and they were legally permitted to interrogate them for unspecified lengths of time without an attorney present.<sup>43</sup>

The multiple interrogation sessions, especially those of Morris Bolber, provided investigators with a wealth of information regarding the arsenic plot. Police gained additional knowledge from anonymous letters, some from as far away as Chicago. The correspondence usually included general gossip about the ring's witchcraft activities, specific details of individuals' past associations with the group's members, and people's recollections of the suspicious deaths of relatives, especially those in which an arsenic suspect was somehow involved. The information uncovered about the arsenic ring enabled the Philadelphia police and the FBI to arrest 25 members.<sup>44</sup>

### Disposition of the Arsenic Ring

The majority of the arsenic cases were tried in Philadelphia courts between August 1939 and January 1940. Each suspect's trial followed the pattern set by previous proceedings: incriminating testimony from doctors, insurance agents, toxicologists, chemists, and fellow ring members supplemented by physical evidence from an exhumed corpse formed the basis of the prosecution's case. Despite efforts by defense attorneys to discredit opposing witnesses and disprove the evidence, the jury usually returned a murder conviction. McDevitt prosecuted a total of twenty-five poison cases, with twenty-two convictions and three acquittals.

Juries found the principal leaders of the syndicate, Morris Bolber, Paul Petrillo, Herman Petrillo, and Carina Favato, guilty of all charges against them. In exchange for their cooperation to the police investigation, Bolber and Favato

managed to avoid the death penalty, but did spend the remainder of their lives in prison. During their sentencing hearings, both received high praise from law enforcement officials for the assistance they rendered in arresting and convicting the other ring members.<sup>45</sup> The Petrillos were not so fortunate.

The prosecution's devastating evidence against Paul Petrillo—especially the testimony of Cacopardo and Bolber—compelled him to plead guilty on the tenth day of his trial; however, he later tried to convince the sentencing judge that he was innocent. Petrillo claimed that Bolber had mesmerized him with the power of the evil eye and that the spiritualist had made him a helpless pawn. The judge did not believe his assertions and he was executed in the electric chair at Rockview State Correctional Institution in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, on March 31, 1940.

Herman Petrillo's case was a lengthy process. The State Supreme Court overturned the conviction against him for the death of Ferdinand Alfonsi on the grounds that Judge Harry S. McDevitt had given the prosecution too much freedom in presenting its case, but ADA McDevitt quickly indicted him for the murder of Ralph Caruso. In a second trial, the jury found Petrillo guilty and again recommended his death. Despite many appeals, he too was executed at Rockview on October 20, 1941.<sup>46</sup>

After the disposition of the major poison cases, the police still had several leads to investigate, yet most of them were never fully explored. For example, the arsenic ring was allegedly involved with an arson-for-insurance scheme and had connections to bombing experts for such activities, but the police apparently failed to uncover substantive evidence regarding these crimes. The investigative team also discovered what they thought were two additional murder rings operating in the Philadelphia area, both independent of the captured arsenic ring. Although the new rings were similar to the original arsenic organization, each functioned with slight variations. One ring utilized anti-mony for poisoning its victims and the other poisoned expectant mothers with a mineral substance. The police ordered more exhumations, but no additional arrests were made. Investigators evidently uncovered no further information regarding these murder organizations.<sup>47</sup>

At the conclusion of the arsenic trials, police and prosecutors attributed thirty-five deaths to the ring, but they suspected that the arsenic murderers were responsible for many more. Some officials believed that the total body count could have exceeded one hundred, perhaps even one thousand. Morris Bolber admitted during court proceedings that he personally knew of seventy arsenic murders, but he may have exaggerated his claims to remain useful to prosecutors.<sup>48</sup> Considering the complexity of the arsenic ring organization, the different types of murder in which it was involved, the length of time it operated, and the probability that an unknown number of members remained undiscovered, the number of victims could have very easily surpassed the official total.

Obviously, the arsenic ring's mixture of murder and insurance fraud was not an original idea. Shortly after the ring's capture, Hollywood further popularized the combination in the thriller *Double Indemnity* (1944). In the film, Barbara Stanwyck's character convinces an insurance agent played by Fred MacMurray to insure her husband and then kill him by pushing him off a moving train. While trying to keep the murder hidden from MacMurray's perceptive boss, portrayed by Edward G. Robinson, their plan goes awry. The vindictive wife and shady insurance agent are apprehended and executed.

The ring's prevalent use of arsenic to kill victims was hardly more innovative. Arsenic's availability and ease of administration made it a common choice among poisoners prior to the ring.<sup>49</sup> Yet Bolber, Favato, and the Petrillos added a strange, unique twist to poison murder and insurance fraud by offering arsenic to individuals under the guise of *la fatura*. Their actions removed the poison from the realm of the conventional and made it a part of the ritualistic traditions that played such a prominent role in the lives of some Italian immigrants. Combining *la fatura* with persuasive tactics in the form of *malocchio*, added to the mystical component of their crimes and completed their prescription for profitable murder.

The arsenic ring also was unusual because of its large membership and number of victims. Investigating and prosecuting the ring severely strained Philadelphia's justice system, consuming nearly two and one-half years from the initial probe into Ferdinand Alfonsi's death to the sentencing of Morris Bolber. Nevertheless, through their exhaustive efforts, Philadelphia's law enforcement community brought the known membership of one of the largest, most bizarre murder organizations to justice.

## Notes

1. "Eighteen Efforts to Insure Poison Victim Bared," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 3, 1939, 1, 6.
2. To maintain plausible deniability, Petrillo preferred to have someone else kill the intended victim. John J. Cacopardo and Don Weldon, *Show Me a Miracle: The True Story of a Man Who Went from Prison to Pulpit* (London: Victor Gollancz Limited, 1962), 113; "Germ Plot Laid to Poison Ring by Physician," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 2, 1939, 1, 4; Vincent P. McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder Ring," June 1947, McDevitt (Biddle) Family Collection, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 8-11; and Department of the Treasury, U.S. Secret Service, "Herman Petrillo Case," File j-3-20, 573 Freedom of Information Act Request.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. "Eighteen Efforts," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1, 6.
6. McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder," 3-4.
7. *Ibid.*, 4-6.
8. *Ibid.*; Sister Mary Alma McNicolas, "A Study of Some Effects of Ingested Arsenious Oxide" (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1937), 1-34.
9. McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder Ring," 6.
10. *Ibid.*, 9.
11. *Ibid.*, 15; "Germ Plot Laid to Poison Ring by Physician," 1, 4.
12. *Ibid.*
13. "Police on Trail of Arsenic Ring 'Mastermind,'" February 5, 1939, 1, 2; "More Arrests Due in Poison Inquiry," February 7, 1939, 15; "Poison Probe Leads to Sing Sing," February 9, 1939, 2; and Alexander Kendrick, "Poison Ring Chief is Reported Held," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 10, 1939, 1.
14. *Ibid.*; McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder Ring," 18; Cacopardo and Weldon, *Show Me a Miracle*, 94-95. Cacopardo almost did not serve as a witness against the arsenic ring. The warden of Sing Sing prison refused to allow Cacopardo to be released into the custody of Philadelphia police. In response, McDevitt attempted to secure a court order for his release based on the Uniform Interstate Witness Act (approved by Congress in the mid 1930s and approved both by Pennsylvania and New York) which allowed the exchange of witnesses between states—with the exception of convicts. He received a successful ruling, which expanded the act to apply to prisoners. However, this was the first and last time the act was used since the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional within a year after the arsenic ring case.
15. "Framed to Hide Poison Deaths, Prisoners Says," February 12, 1939, 1, 4; and "Police Probe Voodooism in Arsenic Plot," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 13, 1939, 1.
16. *Ibid.*
17. McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder Ring," 27; *Ibid.*, 28; and "Petrillo Withdraws Fight to quit Jail in Poison Ring Case," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 20, 1939, 3.
18. McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder Ring," 27-28; and "Grand Jury Indicts Four in Poison Ring on Murder Charge," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 18, 1939, 1, 5.
19. *Ibid.*, 28; and "Petrillo Withdraws Fight to Quit Jail," 3.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. Owen F. McDonnell, "G-Men Offer to Aid Arsenic Ring Expose," May 13, 1939, 1, 2; Owen F. McDonnell, "Science of G-Men to Aid Poison Quiz; Feud Splits Probe," May 16, 1939, 1, 18; Owen F. McDonnell, "G-Men Search for Poisoner's 'Rose of Death,'" *Philadelphia Inquirer* May 17, 1939, 1, 8. Although Judge McDevitt asked for the FBI's intervention, District Attorney Charles Kelley did not want the agency to join the investigation according to FBI internal memoranda. Kelley was running for re-election the following year and was afraid the FBI's involvement in the case might make his office appear weak. U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Arsenic Murder Ring," File 62-53987, Sections 1-4, Freedom of Information Act Request.
23. "Four Plead Not Guilty in Poison Plot," February 22, 1939, 15; "Six Jurors Chosen in Poisoning Case," March 14, 1939, 1; "Detective Attacked by Petrillo's Son," March 16, 1939, 1, 4; "Petrillo Hired Killers, Says U.S. Agent," March 17, 1939, 1, 16; Owen F.

McDonnell, "Convict Names Two Petrillos as Murder Ring Heads," March 18, 1939, 13, 28; "Paul Petrillo Boasted Power to Kill, Women Tells Arsenic Trial," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 19, 1939, 1, 3; and "Fifth Mystery Death Linked to Petrillo in Trial Surprise," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 21, 1939, 1, 16, 24. "Poison Plots Denied by Petrillo," March 22, 1939, 1, 16; Owen F. McDonnell, "Petrillo Found Guilty; Jury Recommends Chair," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 23, 1939, 1, 16, 25. Following his release on bail, Paul Petrillo recovered hidden insurance policies and exchanged them for cash surrender value checks at several insurance companies. He then visited several houses in north and south Philadelphia. After briefly conversing with various women at each residence—whom he was apparently warning to remain quiet about the ring—he subsequently deposited the insurance checks at his bank. Petrillo's deposits gave the police two important pieces of information: his bank's name which gave them access to his financial records and the names of prospective victims (through the names listed on the checks) who could be quietly warned about the plot against them. McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder Ring," 27-29; and McDonnell, "Petrillo Found Guilty; Jury Recommends Chair," 1.

26. "Auto Murders Laid to Petrillo's Ring," March 26, 1939, 1; "Poison Hunt Turns to New Jersey," March 28, 1939, 17; "New Poison Found in Ring Victim," April 18, 1939, 21; "Bare Fifteen Attempts to Get Insurance on Arsenic Victim," April 20, 1939, 1, 4; "Insurance Agent Reveals Offer From Poison Ring," April 21, 1939, 1, 4; and "Woman on Trial Confesses Three Arsenic Murders," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 22, 1939, 1, 4.

27. "Poisoner of Three Ready to Bare All Tomorrow," April 23, 1939, 1; "Poison Ring Threatens Mrs. Favato's Son in Plot to Silence Her," April 24, 1939, 1; and "Poison Widow, Fearing Death, Tells of Plots," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 25, 1939, 1.

28. "Seventy-five Involved as Killers or Aides in Poison Ring at Death Fee of \$300," April 26, 1939, 1, 18; Owen F. McDonnell, "Doomed Poisoner Tells Whole Story of Insurance Murder Ring; Three More Now Ac-

cused," April 27, 1939, 1, 11; Owen F. McDonnell, "Fifteen More Poisoners Face Arrest as Ring's Toll Mounts Hourly; and Crowd Threatens Mrs. Favato," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 28, 1939, 1, 4.

29. "Herman Petrillo Hints at Unnamed Poison Chief," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 2, 1939, 1, 4.

30. *Ibid.*; George M. Mawhinney, "Poison Dealer in Eight Murders, Petrillo Says," April 29, 1939, 1, 2; "Valenti Had Mania to Kill, Ex-wife Says," April 28, 1939, 4; and Isadore Trapea and Walter W. Ruch, "Am I About to Die? Marked for Death by 'Rose of Death,' Victim Pictures his Tortures," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 28, 1939, 1, 5; Cacopardo and Weldon, *Show Me a Miracle*, 103. For a detailed discussion of the attributes of organized crime and the Sicilian Camorra's structure, see Howard Abadinsky's *Organized Crime* (Nelson-Hall, Inc., 1994).

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. Cacopardo and Weldon, *Show Me A Miracle*, 116-17. Similarly, a wife could approach one of the spiritualists in search of a folk cure for her families' ailments and be given the arsenic substance as a medicine. One of the arsenic widows, Josephine Romualdo, even knew the 'potential' effects of la fatura, and she seemingly viewed it as a catchall cure for her husband's physical abuse of her. During her trial, she stated that she "only wanted to make him better or hurry his death." "Arsenic Widow Says Petrillo Killed Husband," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 20, 1939, 1, 3.

34. Cacopardo and Weldon, *Show Me a Miracle*, 24, 45, 110; McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder Ring," 21-22, 25. The ring's clientele was not strictly limited to women; men also became entangled in the plot. For example, Dominick Cassetti fell victim to the designs of two arsenic ring lower "witches," Josephine Sadita and Providenza Micciche. After the pair initially offered to help Cassetti's wife with an illness, they later used witchcraft rituals and the 'evil eye' to terrorize the superstitious Cassetti and force him to mix arsenic powders in his spouse's food. They regularly held seances around a supposedly magical milk pitcher in Cassetti's candle-lit basement, each



time offering new doses of poison for his wife. She subsequently died and the witches collected a portion of the victim's insurance money for the ring. "Two Witches Forced Him to Poison Wife, Arsenic Suspects Sobs," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 16, 1939, 3.

35. If a wife did not have over a thousand dollars worth of insurance, the ring typically would increase it to a more substantial amount and then take ten percent of the profits. To obtain some policies, they used mail-order insurance companies located in California. This fact may have been the origin of a phrase Paul Petrillo commonly used to refer to a victim's murder, which he termed as sending them "to California." Cacopardo and Weldon, *Show Me a Miracle*, 120; McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder Ring," 12, 16, 20-22, 24; Owen F. McDonnell, "Doomed Poisoner Tells Whole Story of Insurance Murder Ring; Three More Women Now Found Accused," April 27, 1939, 1, 11; and George Mawhinney, "New Murders Linked to Arsenic Ring," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 3, 1939, 1, 6.

36. "Woman on Trial Confesses Three Arsenic Murders," April 22, 1939, 1, 5; George M. Mawhinney, "New Murders are Linked to Arsenic Ring," May 3, 1939, 1, 36; and "Police Press Rodio and 'Kiss of Death' on Poison Plot Details," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 22, 1939, 12.

37. McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder Ring," 29.

38. *Ibid.* McDevitt's strategy proved particularly effective on Morris Bolber. A native of Russia's Transvaal region, Bolber was an extremely brilliant individual who was fluent in fourteen languages, authored five books on Moses and the twelve tribes of Israel, and wrote a series of articles on witchcraft and Satanism. A self-professed expert on the occult, Bolber said that he had studied under a mysterious Indian seeress who taught him about folk healing and witchcraft. The spiritualist claimed that his vast mystical knowledge had enabled him to assist thousands of people in the Philadelphia area with their problems. Bolber was obviously a very intelligent and talented individual, but he also happened to be very conceited. McDevitt recognized this attempted to use Bolber's vanity to his advantage. For the arsenic leader's questioning, McDevitt

rented a suite of fancy rooms at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia, and Chief of County Detectives William Connelly specially appointed the spiritualist a chief investigator. The investigative team treated Bolber to numerous expensive dinners complete with hors d'oeuvres, champagne, and cigars. After the police had showered the suspect with flattery and fine dining, he opened up to them and offered to do what he could to "clean up the ring." Over the next two days, he talked almost non-stop, providing so much information on the various arsenic ring murders that two stenographers had to work alternating shifts to copy it all down. He intricately outlined the details of the ring's operation in a total of six twenty-to-fifty page statements. His assistance greatly aided ADA McDevitt's prosecution efforts, particularly his case against Paul Petrillo.

39. "Parties for Poison Suspects Defended," *Philadelphia Inquirer* July 1, 1939, 3. Of course, there were occasionally some conferences where friction developed among the suspects—even to the point of the 'evil eye' being invoked by certain syndicate members. See Owen F. McDonnell, "Doomed Poisoner Tells Whole Story of Insurance Murder Ring; Three More Women Now Accused," April 27, 1939, 1, 11; George M. Mawhinney, "Valenti Denies Role in Poison Plot Murders," May 1, 1939, 1, 26; and "Rodio and Bolber Clash at 'Reunion,' Police Halt Fight," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 21, 1939, 1, 10.

40. McDevitt, "Arsenic Murder Ring," 25-26.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. In 1940, the Supreme Court decided in *Chambers v. Florida*, that confession obtained through the combination of prolonged isolation and strong-arm interrogation tactics were invalid. Still, the police were allowed to question suspects without a lawyer present if they acted within reason. In the 1953 case *Stein v. New York*, the Court also upheld the prerogative of police to apply psychological pressures and deceptions again if the measures were reasonable. As far as the arsenic ring cases were concerned, the methods used by interrogators fell within the legal parameters of the period's justice system.

44. One ring member, Josephine Sadita, remained a fugitive until 1945. Owen F. McDonnell, "Letters Open New Avenue in Poison Inquiry," May 11, 1939, 1, 4; "Poison Ring 'Fan Mail' Bares Mystery Deaths to Philadelphia Detectives," June 1, 1939, 2; Owen F. McDonnell, "G-Men Search for 'Rose of Death'; Two More Bodies Dug Up," May 17, 1939, 1, 8; Owen F. McDonnell, "Arsenic Ring Fugitive is Arrested in Cleveland," May 18, 1939, 1, 9; and Owen F. McDonnell, "The Kiss of Death' Talks After G-Men Capture Her in N.Y.," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 19, 1939, 1, 11.

45. "Herman Petrillo Again Faces Death," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 3, 1940, 6; "Bolber Gets Life for Murder," *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia), January 7, 1942, 1.

46. "Three Judges Hear Paul Petrillo's Plea," November 1, 1939, 21; Frank O'Gara, "Petrillo Executed for Poison Deaths," March 31, 1940, 1, 3; "Petrillo Convicted Again; Death Sentence Imposed," May 8, 1940, 23; "Herman Petrillo Again Faces Death," October 3, 1940, 6; "Herman Petrillo Loses Last Plea," May 15, 1941, 21; "Supreme Court Rebuffs Petrillo," July 2, 1941, 25; and "Petrillo Executed; Arsenic Ring Killer," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 20, 1941, 1, 2.

47. Cacopardo and Weldon, Show Me a Miracle, 119-20; Owen F. McDonnell,

"Widow Admits Paul Petrillo Killed Husband; New Murder-for-Profit is Uncovered," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 10, 1939, 1, 11; "Report Twenty-five Mothers Slain," *New York Times*, May 18, 1940, 34; and "Philadelphia Acts on New Death Ring," *New York Times*, May 19, 1940, 40. Since the information on the new murder rings originated with the captured arsenic ring members, it is possible that the suspects were attempting to mislead the investigators or exaggerate and extend their usefulness to them. In one instance, Herman Petrillo claimed that he had important information regarding a murder case which police suspected was connected to the arsenic ring. Although Petrillo said that he knew "plenty" about the case, when police gave him a public opportunity to make a statement about it, his only remark was "I'll tell you later." Ralph Cropper, "Camden Death Linked to Poison Death Ring," August 30, 1939, 17; "Link Petrillo and Dworecki," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 2, 1939, 15.

48. "Bolber Links Paul Petrillo to Three Poison Murders," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 23, 1939, 15.

49. George M. Mawhinney, "Herman Petrillo Linked to Twenty-one Murders; Three 'Executioners' Named," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 30, 1939, 1, 18.