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A Gangster's Paradise With Views, Thick Walls and a Slaughter Room

The Appraisal

By MATT A.V. CHABAN NOV. 2, 2015

FORT LEE, N.J. — Mafia blood has stained many corners of this metropolis. Five Points. The Red Hook docks. The Meadowlands. Harlem. The South Shore of Staten Island.

While this North Jersey borough might seem an unlikely capital on the gangland map, in the mid-20th century it was home to some of the most notorious mobsters around: Joe Adonis, Willie Moretti, Longie Zwillman and most famous and feared of all, the head of Murder Incorporated, Albert Anastasia.

For those wanting to live like a Mafia don — and willing to live with a few ghosts — Guernsey's will auction off the old Anastasia estate on Dec. 8, with a minimum price of \$5.5 million.

That price might be considered a bargain now, with McMansions popping up on almost every lot. Just next door, a seven-bedroom, 13,500-square-foot home built in 2007 came on the market in June for \$18.9 million.

But when August Kleinzahler grew up here in the 1950s, the Palisades neighborhood in Fort Lee was more modest and about as idyllic a place as could be found: gracious Tudor and Georgian homes, sweeping views of Manhattan.

His best friend Gloriana Anastasia's house, a sprawling Mission-style mansion at 75 Bluff Road, was bigger than most — when it was built in 1947, the 25-room spread ruined the Kleinzahlers' views. But for all young August knew, it was nothing special to have a gruff, 250-pound, fedora-wearing, gun-toting Italian au pair, as Gloriana did.

“He was the best babysitter in the world,” Mr. Kleinzahler, the popular poet, said of his friend's bodyguard in a phone interview from San Francisco. “He'd be sitting there, his pistol gleaming in the sun while we played in the sandbox — we never went to Gloriana's house — and my mother knew she could go out and do her shopping and not worry about a thing.”

On Oct. 25, 1957, that all changed. When Mr. Kleinzahler came home from school, reporters, cameramen and news trucks were crowding the Anastasias' seven-foot gates.

“I asked my mother what happened, and she said Gloriana's daddy had gotten very, very sick, and so Gloriana and her mommy are going to have to go away for a while,” he recalled.

That morning, Albert Anastasia had left the house with his chauffeur for his regular shave at the Park Sheraton Hotel (now the Park Central) in Midtown Manhattan. He never made it out of the barber's chair. The Lord High Executioner was dead.

Over the years, 75 Bluff Road continued to attract colorful characters, with no telling who might be next.

After Mr. Anastasia's death, Del Webb, the powerful Southwestern developer and former owner of the Yankees, helped buy the 25-room property for his friend Buddy Hackett, the clownish comedian and “Love Bug” star who often headlined at Mr. Webb's casinos in Las Vegas. When he moved to Hollywood, the home passed to

Arthur Imperatore Sr., the trucking and ferry tycoon who turned a single delivery truck into a billion-dollar empire and the derelict Weehawken docks into a wonderland of apartments.

“We spent 10 years looking for a home for my wife, and then the moment I stepped foot on the property, I knew this was it,” Mr. Imperatore said last week. “It was like a retreat, kind of a cocoon, but still right in the middle of the action.”

Mr. Imperatore, 90, has decided to sell after the death of his wife this year.

Part of the reason for the home’s relatively modest price could be that the Anastasia estate is remarkably intact, perhaps too much so. The Hacketts and the Imperatores did not change much, and in recent years, paint has begun to peel and plaster crumble.

Still, the tiled roof, marble fireplace and rolling grounds are well preserved. Plush carpeting and single-pane windows will probably go, but the views stretching from the George Washington Bridge to the World Trade Center cannot be replaced. Vintage kitchens and bathrooms have almost as much tile as Pompeii.

“Given his connections, I could see Anastasia going down to the tile union, and before you know it, a dozen of their best guys were up here,” Arlan Ettinger, the president of Guernsey’s and a longtime friend of Mr. Imperatore’s, said during a tour last week.

While in many ways the home looks like a conventional early postwar estate, some details betray its violent foundations. The stucco exterior walls are at least a foot thick, and every room has two or more doorways, for quick getaways. Sandy Hackett, the comedian’s son, recalled a false wall in his sister’s closet that led to a guest bedroom (the passage itself appears to have vanished today), and there were rumors of a tunnel into the cliffside.

The basement could rival most homes in size and opulence, with a dozen rooms, including one that the elder Mr. Hackett converted into a screening room, complete with a bar and fake candy stand, intact down to the original projectors.

And then there was the strange tiled room with a drain in the floor and nothing else. The younger Mr. Hackett said his father turned it into a dark room for developing film, but when he asked about it as a child, he was told it was originally used to carve up deer after hunting trips.

“Whenever you went in there, it was always five degrees colder, just chilly and eerie,” Mr. Hackett said in a phone interview from Los Angeles. “I don’t know about deer, but they were definitely slaughtering something in there.” The Imperatores replaced it with a sauna and Jacuzzi room.

Mr. Imperatore had his own flair, with peacocks and guinea fowl wandering the 1.3-acre grounds. A flock of parakeets once escaped and still live there, buzzing about the patio’s statuary and fountains.

The home also served him longer, and better, than Mr. Anastasia.

The government used it against him when it charged Mr. Anastasia with tax evasion. Mr. Imperatore’s stepson, Armand Pohan, a lawyer and Fort Lee councilman, recalled how a judge once told him of the time the prosecution pulled the blueprints for the house, built a model and presented it at trial in the 1950s.

“They asked the jury, ‘How could a man who claimed no income the past five years build a house like this?’” Mr. Pohan said. “That was Exhibit A. And they won.”

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