

Former crime lord Battle dies

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Jose Miguel Battle Sr., former godfather of the Cuban mob, died in federal custody at a dialysis facility in South Carolina, his attorney confirmed to The Miami Herald late Sunday. He was 77.

Battle, who had been suffering from liver failure, diabetes and cardiac problems, was awaiting a spot in federal prison to serve out his 20-year sentence on racketeering charges, attorney Jack Blumenfeld said. He died Friday morning.

"He was in a private place, an assisted-living facility," said Blumenfeld, Battle's attorney since 1978. "He was sick for a long time."

Battle was the reputed leader of "The Corporation," a Cuban organized-crime group that made millions from decades of illegal bookmaking, *bolita* lotteries and drug trafficking. Known as "*El Padrino*," or Godfather, Battle directed the large organization with ties from New York to Latin America.

Battle's career began in law enforcement, when he worked as a vice cop in Havana under Fulgencio Batista's regime. He fled Cuba after Fidel Castro took power.

In the United States, the CIA recruited Battle to join Brigade 2056, which landed in Cuba during the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion.

CUBAN PRISON

Battle spent almost two years in a Cuban prison for his involvement in the invasion, then he settled in Union City, N.J., where he opened a jewelry store.

Over the next several decades, Battle rose to lead a 2,500-person gambling operation that made most of its profits from fixed "little ball" lotteries.

A Miami-Dade court convicted him in 1977 of murder conspiracy and solicitation. Prosecutors at the time said Battle paid a gunman \$15,000, gave him six cartridges and ordered him to put one "right between the eyebrows" of an employee Battle suspected of stealing from The Corporation.

But the verdict and 30-year sentence were overturned on appeal, and Battle was given credit for two years he had already served in prison.

He was a large man with blue-gray eyes who retired to a 30-acre South Miami-Dade ranch in the early '80s. News reports listed Battle as one of South Florida's richest residents in 1987, with a net wealth of \$175 million.

Over the years, authorities tried tying him to contract murders and arsons in New York, New Jersey and Florida as The Corporation warred with rival Italian-American crime families. Dozens of people died in more than 120 storefront firebombings.

Battle's lawyers maintained that he ended his involvement with organized crime in the late '80s.

"He had nothing to do with any arson or burning," Blumenfeld told The Miami Herald last year.

Battle fled to Peru in the early '90s after police charged many of his friends and associates with gambling and money laundering. None of them implicated the Godfather.

Battle, who had first married in Havana in 1951, also married Evelyn Runciman, a Peruvian woman 40 years his junior so he could operate a hotel and casino in Lima. That business was later cited as a key money-laundering spot for The Corporation.

He returned to South Florida in 1995, eventually taking up residence in West Kendall. He lied to immigration officers about his marriage and criminal history, leading to a short sentence for passport fraud. He was sentenced again a few years later on a gun charge and was released in 1999.

After an investigation that spanned almost two decades, authorities arrested Battle in March 2004 in the produce section of his neighborhood Publix.

Within a few days, agents had rounded up 25 Battle associates, including his son Jose Miguel Battle Jr., now 54, whom they accused of running the crime organization after his father passed it to him.

HEALTH FAILED

The elder Battle's health deteriorated during his trial, parts of which he slept through in a recliner set up in the courtroom. He pleaded guilty in May 2006, following guilty pleas from 13 of his associates.

His son remains in federal custody in Miami.

Battle Sr. was sentenced in January to 20 years but was out on \$1 million bond as he awaited a prison bed and received medical treatment, Blumenfeld said.

His client took the plea, Blumenfeld said at the time, so he could "die at home rather than in jail."

Funeral arrangements were not complete late Sunday but are being handled by Bernardo Garcia Funeral Homes, 8215 Bird Road, in Miami.