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## **The Many Lives of Ken Eto: Chicago Outfit's Gambling Czar**

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*Description: Ken Eto was not your typical Chicago gangster. Of Asian descent, he bucked the odds and rose to be one of the top men in the syndicate. But when his gangster family turns on him, Ken must find a way to survive.*

After a lifetime of working for the Chicago mafia, Ken Eto knew when something didn't seem right. His dinner invitation by the Outfit capo Vincent Solano was unusual, and coming just a couple weeks before what would probably be a harsh sentencing against Eto in federal court, the timing seemed ominous. In the thirty years he had worked for the Chicago outfit, he had never once given them a reason to question his loyalty. He had made the mob millions in gambling revenues and kept its secrets when questioned during numerous arrests. This time however, something seemed different.

As evening approached, Ken cleaned up with a bath and put on his best suit. Whatever happened tonight, he would face it with dignity and honor. There would be no reason to carry a gun – not that he ever did. Ken's specialty was numbers and he was good at it. His only real mistake came recently when the FBI raided his lottery business headquarters and literally caught Eto holding a bag of receipts. It was a bust he would not be able to beat, but he was willing to do his time. Whether his bosses believed he would do it quietly, Ken Eto did not know.

He organized some personal papers, making sure his life insurance policy was left where his wife could easily find it, and drove off in his modest 1976 Ford Torino. He had been instructed to pick up a couple of unknown associates at a nearby location, and when Ken Eto spotted John Gattuso and Jasper Campise,

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he knew he was in real trouble. These gangsters were the real deals – enforcers and clean-up men. Any lingering doubts as to how this night was going to go were now answered.

Campise climbed in the passenger's seat and Gattuso slipped in back directly behind Eto. As the three of them drove off, Ken Eto braced himself for the inevitable. For what seemed like an eternity, the three men drove down the Chicago streets until Campise asked if they could pull

over for a minute. Spotting an empty parking lot, Ken Eto guided his car in and clicked it into park. Before he could say anything, a gunshot rang out from the backseat. Ken heard the shot, and immediately felt the bullet crack into his skull. The force blew him forward against the steering wheel where he started to convulse. Gattuso reached up, brought his pistol forward and shot two more bullets point-blank into the back of Ken's skull. With that, the bloodied gambler stopped moving.

The job had been an easy one for the veteran hitmen. The potential federal witness had been dealt with in the typical Outfit fashion – permanently. With witnesses around, the gunman withdrew from the car and disappeared into the night.

In most gangster tales, this is where the story ends. This however is not your typical gangster story, for in the blood stained car, the body of Ken Eto slumped back and let out a long groan. There was much more story left in this one.

## Early Years

When one describes the typical member of the Chicago Italian mafia, Ken Eto would be the farthest thing from that. The short, quiet, conservative son of Japanese immigrants stood out as very different from his loud, brash European counterparts.

Ken's parents had moved to California in 1917, two years before he was born. His father was a professor in physics back in Japan, but because he refused to learn English, he spent his years in America driving trucks and gardening. To further shed light on Ken's influences, his father was a religious fanatic who did not believe in physical pleasures or recreation. This harsh upbringing instilled a feeling of rebellion in young Ken which he harbored for the rest of his life. (Ken's mother, not able to cope with the family, fled back to Japan where she eventually died in an insane asylum.)

Ken's rebellion started early. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade and immediately started hustling in the streets. There, he learned how to take care of himself, dabbling in cons and stolen goods.

During World War II, the young man was arrested in the state of Washington for the first time for violation of the curfew laws which required Japanese citizens to stay within their segregated ghettos.

He next pops up in 1950 in Pocatello, Idaho, where he was busted for playing an elaborate con on unsuspecting citizens. In what police called a "bunco scam", Ken Eto sold a box of reported expensive

jewels, sight unseen, to a local farmer. Ken handed over a locked box for \$5000 cash and fled. When the farmer opened the box to inspect his new wealth, he found nothing but candy bars. Ken was arrested, and because of his lengthy rap sheet, was sentenced to fourteen years in prison. However, he would only serve one and half years before being granted parole.

Ken, now a free man, had few prospects for work and was flat broke. He moved again to try to find a place where he could use his street smarts and where his knowledge for cons would not only be appreciated but admired.

## Welcome to Chicago!

It didn't take long for the Chicago gangs to notice Ken's hustle. It was 1952 and the 33 year old Eto was earning a reputation for himself at the local gambling joints as an organized man who knew his way around the

odds. His potential as a real money earner was clear. Ross Prio, the number two guy behind head boss Sam Giancana, took a personal liking to Ken Eto and brought him in under his wing. With Ross as his benefactor, there was no limit to Ken's potential inside the Outfit.

Ken, now taking on the alias "Joe", was given control of various clubs and gambling dens all over Chicago. He was making money for himself and the Outfit, but with success comes notoriety and eventually the authorities were harassing

Ken and his establishments. One of his first arrests for Chicago gambling came at the Tropicana Night Club at 1244 N. Clark street in 1953. It was described as a place attended



by “Orientals and Puerto Ricans”. Ken focused on those not catered to by the other gangs and made a fortune doing so.

NAME <u>Joe Eto</u>		SPECIAL MONOGRAM						
Address _____		6						
Town _____	State _____							
Per _____								
Amount	Color	Initials Both Sides	Style Type	Initials One Side	Other Side	Style Type	Monogram Color	Date Shipped
101	Lavender	L	Heavy					11/6/54
202	White	L	Heavy					11/6/54
101	Red	L	Heavy					4/6/54
202	Green	L						4/6/54
303	Red	L						10/16/53
404	Blue	L						10/16/53
101	Yellow	L						10/16/53
404	Chocolate	L					Gold	4/13/54
2002	Green	L					Gold	4/13/54

*These chips, ordered from Taylor & Co were most likely used in the Tropicana Night Club. Notice the sparse information on the order card only shows the alias "Joe Eto" but the dates correspond with Eto's time running the Tropicana.*

As profitable as the gambling clubs were, Ken Eto really found his stride when he took over the bolita racket in Chicago. Bolita is a form of gambling, not unlike the lottery, which was played by mostly the poor and blue collar workers. It could be played for very little (sometimes a nickel) and would pay off hundred of times the investment. The odds of winning were, of course, much lower than the payoff and thus was a tremendous money maker for the operators.

It was Ken Eto's success in the bolito market that sparked a mini-war in 1957 which left many dead gangsters in its wake. Although it was well known that the murders were not done directly by Ken himself, the fact he was left as boss at the end makes his involvement somewhat suspect.

During the 1960s, Ken was now on top of the Chicago Outfits gambling empire. He was running games out of his Bourbon Street Night Club on Rush Street and the Velvet Swing Night Club on Walton, as well as a large bookmaking operation at the

Subway Pool Room on North Clark. He extended into “Go-Go dives” and clubs that showed adult films. All the while, his bolita empire was estimated by the FBI to be bringing in upwards of \$50,000 a day. In all ways, the 1960s was a time when Ken's businesses were firing on all cylinders. He was making a fortune and becoming a very powerful man in the Outfit. But with great success comes pressure, and Ken Eto was about to start feeling it.

### The Hard Times

As the 1970s rolled around, Ken Eto was starting to face some significant challenges. In 1972 he would lose his biggest supporter when Ross Prio would do what most high ranking Outfit bosses found difficult – he would die peacefully of natural causes after a long life. Although Ken had done enough to earn some respect in the Outfit, he was still seen as an outsider. He had endured the many nicknames within the family since day one; Joe the Jap, Tokyo Joe, the Chinaman. Hardly a day went by that he wasn't reminded that he was different. He was an outsider existing in their world and now he was on his own.

It was also during this time that Ken Eto was being put under extreme scrutiny by the FBI. Regardless of how little respect he may have gotten from the Outfit, the FBI knew exactly how important he was. Every move he made was analyzed and reported on. Agents tailed him on vacations and made detailed notes on every aspect of his personal life even going as far as noting in a report that Ken “is a constant user of cocaine which serves as a sex stimulant to him.”

In the late 1970s a task force was created to go after Ken Eto and his gambling empire. (Special Agent Elaine Smith would be



a part of it and chronicles her efforts to take down Eto and the mob in her autobiography *A Gun in My Gucci*.) After years of gathering evidence, the FBI finally sprung their trap and on an afternoon in May 1982 raided Eto's numbers racket in a room at the Holiday Inn in Melrose Park, a suburb of Chicago. Inside the room agents found Ken Eto surrounded by piles of bolito receipts and money. His hands couldn't be more red. This was a bust that all the money in world couldn't fix. He was looking at doing some real time in prison.

NAME		Address		Town		State		Per	
Joe Jap		Chicago							
Amount	Color	Initials Both Sides	Style Type	Initials One Side	Other Side	Style Type	Monogram Color	Date Shipped	
1400	Maroon			1500			Gold		
1400	Blue			4100			"		
100	Black			1000			"	6-2-61	
500	Yellow			2000			Blue		

These chips, ordered from Taylor & Co in 1961 were probably used at one of his various locations. Notice the name "Joe the Jap", one of Eto's many nicknames within the Chicago Outfit. (Chip courtesy of Doug Deems.)

And with this raid, the Outfit was left with a problem. Although Ken Eto had been a loyal member for decades, he was now looking at spending a considerable chunk of the rest of his days in jail. Could he be trusted?

Under Ross Prio, no doubt Ken Eto would have felt safe. But now Vincent Solano was calling the shots, and it was no secret that Vincent was not fond of Ken. They had both worked for Ross, Vincent as bodyguard and chauffeur and Ken has Ross' prize earner. Jealously probably played a part in Vincent's ultimate decision.

Ken Eto had few choices as he proceeded and plead guilty to the bolito charges hoping

for a lesser sentence. He would have to wait a couple of weeks while the courts contemplated his fate.

While he waited, Ken's nerves couldn't have been helped when news that the Chicago mob's financier, Allen Dorfman, was assassinated three days before his political corruption sentencing. It was clear to everyone that the Outfit was silencing potential leaks. How long did Ken Eto have?

The answer came quickly when he received the invitation for dinner with Solano on February 10, 1983. On that fateful ride with John Gattuso and Jasper Campise, Ken knew his time was up. Instead of running for government help, he faced his fate like the loyal member of the Outfit. When three shots rang out from the backseat, Ken knew there would be no reprieve. With a ringing in his ears, and a concussion in his head, Ken Eto sat against his steering wheel in a daze and faded.

But then he realized something - he wasn't dead!

The shots left him temporarily deaf and his head ached something awful, but he was still alive. He mustered enough strength to open the door and fell out of the car. In a stupor he ambled across the parking lot and stumbled into a nearby pharmacy where he asked to use the phone. After an exchange where the 911 operator asked if he was able to drive himself to the hospital ("ah... no.") he was picked up by an ambulance and tended to while under FBI protection.



Ken Eto, head bandaged, leaving the hospital under Fed protection



Assassination attempts tend to be pretty personal, and his one left an indelible mark on Ken's loyalty. Where he was once a company man, he was now firmly in the other camp and turned to the FBI for protection in exchange for becoming an informant.

What was almost a tragedy for the Feds became a windfall. Ken Eto told everything he had learned from the three decades in the Chicago Outfit. He provided information on thirty murders and handed over his address book that included the names of all his associates as well as police who were on his payroll.

As part of his plea bargain, his sentence was reduced to thirty months probation in exchange for future testimonies against his former gang members.

Understandably, the Chicago Outfit was reeling from the botched hit and its aftermath and was looking for answers. First and foremost, how on earth did Ken Eto survive three gunshot blasts to the head? That, it turns out would be a remarkable stroke of good luck.

It seems the experienced hitmen had a ritual of assembling their own bullets for their hits. This way, it was harder for the police to track down who purchased the bullets because each was unique. However, on this occasion, Gattuso didn't use enough gunpowder and the bullets wouldn't have enough velocity to penetrate Eto's skull, but left a wound messy enough to look like they did.

For their failed hit, Gattuso and Campise were given a harsh punishment. Police found both men's bodies stuffed in the truck of Campise's car. At least the Outfit was able to plug that leak.

Eto's efforts continued for years and he was instrumental in helping the government dismantle much of the Chicago mob scene. He lived until 2004 when he passed away while still under the Witness Protection Program. His life serves as a testament to the importance of loyalty and the fragile line partners in crime balance between friend and enemy.



*Ken Eto, aka Joe Eto, testifying in a case outlining the Chicago organized crime outfit. A hood was worn over his face to help conceal his identity while under the FBI's Witness Protection Program.*