

= Leo Martello =

Leo Martello (September 26 , 1931 ? June 29 , 2000) was a Sicilian @-@ American witch and gay rights activist , and author . He was a founding member of the Strega Tradition of Witchcraft , a form of the modern Pagan new religious movement which drew upon his own Sicilian heritage . During his lifetime he published a number of books on such esoteric subjects as Witchcraft , astrology , and tarot reading .

Born to a working @-@ class Italian American family in Dudley , Massachusetts , he was raised Roman Catholic although became interested in esotericism as a teenager . He later claimed that when he was 21 , relatives initiated him into a tradition of witchcraft inherited from their Sicilian ancestors ; this conflicts with other statements that he made , and there is no independent evidence to corroborate his claim . During the 1950s , he was based in New York City , where he worked as a graphologist and hypnotist . After beginning to publish books on paranormal topics in the early 1960s , he publicly began identifying as Wiccan in 1969 , and stated that he was involved in a New York coven .

After the Stonewall riots of 1969 , Martello ? himself a gay man ? involved himself in gay rights activism , becoming a member of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) . Leaving the GLF following an internal schism , he became a founding member of the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) and authored a regular column , " The Gay Witch " , for its newspaper . In 1970 he founded the Witches International Craft Associates (WICA) as a networking organization for Wiccans , and under its auspices organized a " Witch In " that took place in Central Park at Halloween 1970 , despite opposition from the New York City Parks Department . To campaign for the civil rights of Wiccans , he founded the Witches Anti @-@ Defamation League , which was later renamed the Alternative Religions Education Network . In 1973 , he visited England , there being initiated into Gardnerian Wicca by the Gardnerian High Priestess Patricia Crowther . He continued practicing Wicca into the 1990s , when he retreated from public life , eventually succumbing to cancer in 2000 .

= = Early life = =

= = = Youth : 1930 ? 49 = = =

Martello was born on September 26 , 1930 , in Dudley , Massachusetts , being raised on a small farm rented by his father , the Italian immigrant Rocco Luigi Martello . Following the economic turmoil of the Great Depression , the Martellos were forced from their land and moved first to Worcester , Massachusetts and then to Southbridge , Massachusetts . It was here that Leo was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church , but his parents divorced soon after . Unable to care for him alone , his father sent Martello to the Catholic boarding preparatory school attached to Assumption College , Worcester , which was run by the Augustinians of the Assumption . He spent six years at the school , later describing it as the unhappiest period of his life . He studied graphology and from the age of 16 began making radio appearances as a graphologist , also writing stories for magazines .

Martello later claimed to have experienced psychic phenomena as a child , sparking his interest in occultism . By his early teenage years , he had begun studying palmistry and tarot card reading with a Gypsy named Marta . He also later claimed that his father had informed him that his grandmother , Maria Concetta , had been a psychic known as a Strega Maga (" Great Witch ") in her hometown of Enna , Sicily , Italy . According to Martello 's account , Concetta had worked as a folk magician and tarot card reader , and attracted the hatred and envy of the local Catholic clergy . He also related that on one occasion , she had killed a Mafioso using magic when he threatened her husband for not paying protection money . Martello related that when he was 16 , his father told him that he had cousins in New York City who wished to meet him . He proceeded to do so and ? according to his account ? they informed him that they were initiates of an ancient Italian witchcraft religion , La Vecchia (" the Old Religion ") . After identifying his possession of psychic powers , they initiated

him into the tradition on his 21st birthday in 1951 , making him swear an oath never to reveal the secrets of the La Vecchia . Moving to the city , he studied at Hunter College and the Institute for Psychotherapy .

Martello never produced any proof to support his claims , and there is no independent evidence that corroborate them . An anonymous woman who had known Martello informed the researcher Michael G. Lloyd that during the 1980s , he had told her that he had never been initiated into a tradition of Witchcraft , and that he had simply embraced occultism in the 1960s in order to earn a living . The Pagan studies scholar Ethan Doyle White expressed criticism of Martello 's claims , noting that it was " extremely doubtful " that a tradition of Wicca could have been passed down through Martello 's Sicilian family . Instead , he suggested that Martello might have been instructed in a tradition of folk magic that he later embellished into a form of Wicca , that the cousins themselves had constructed a form of Wicca that they passed on to Martello , or that the entire scenario had been a fabrication of Martello 's .

= = = New York City : 1950 ? 68 = = =

Based in New York City , in 1950 Martello founded the American Hypnotism Academy , continuing to direct the organization until 1954 . From 1955 to 1957 , he served as treasurer of the American Graphological Society , and worked as a freelance graphologist for such corporate clients as the Unifonic Corporation of America and the Associated Special Investigators International . He also published a column titled " Your Handwriting Tells " for eight years that ran in the Chelsea Clinton News , and supplied various articles on the subject of graphology to different magazines . In the city , he also began to frequent the gay scene . In 1955 , Martello was awarded a Doctorate in Divinity by a non @-@ accredited organization , the National Congress of Spiritual Consultants , a clearing house for registered yet unaffiliated ministers . That year , he founded the Temple of Spiritual Guidance , taking on the role of Pastor , which he would continue in until 1960 , when he began to focus on his writing and his new philosophy of " psychoselfism " . In 1961 he published his first book , Your Pen Personality , in which he discussed the manner in which handwriting could be used to reveal the personality of the writer . Martello corresponded with California @-@ based Pagan Victor Henry Anderson , and it was at Martello 's encouragement that Anderson established his Mahaelani Coven circa 1960 .

Martello claimed that in the summer of 1964 , he moved to Tangier , Morocco , where he researched the history of the tarot , resulting in the publication of It 's in the Cards (1964) . Returning to the U.S. in 1965 , he moved in to an apartment in Greenwich Village , New York City , writing a book on astrology , It 's Written in the Stars , and a book on psychic protection , How to Prevent Psychic Blackmail . He also began attending the Spiritualist gatherings that were operated by Clifford Bias at the Ansonia Hotel . At some point High Priestess Lori Bruno founded a witchcraft coven and church , Our Lord and Lady of the Trinacrian Rose , in which Leo was acknowledged as Elder . In 1969 he publicly revealed himself to be a practitioner of Witchcraft ; claiming that he had gained the permission of his coven to do so . Intent on countering the negative publicity that Wicca had been receiving , he published The Weird Ways of Witchcraft in 1969 , the same year that he also published The Hidden World of Hypnotism .

= = Public activism = =

= = = Gay Liberation : 1969 ? 70 = = =

In July 1969 , Martello attended an open meeting of the Mattachine Society 's New York branch . He was appalled at the Society 's negative reaction to the Stonewall riots , and castigated those gay people in the audience who accepted the categorization of homosexuality as a mental illness , accusing them of being self @-@ loathing . He proceeded to publish his thoughts in an essay in which he stated that " homosexuality is not a problem in itself . The problem is society 's attitude

towards it . " Those gay rights activists who rejected the Mattachine Society 's approach and who favored a confrontational stance against the police and authorities founded the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) , with Martello elected the group 's first moderator . Martello supported the GLF 's stance that condemned " this rotten , dirty , vile , fucked @-@ up capitalist conspiracy " that dominated American society , and he volunteered by producing articles both for the group 's newsletter Come Out ! and for the wider press . He was involved in the GLF 's campaign against The Village Voice 's decision to ban the word " gay " from advertisements ; the magazine preferred the term " homophile " , which had also been used by the Mattachine Society . Wanting to break from previous gay liberation organizations , the GLF embraced the term " gay " , with Martello dismissing " homophile " as sounding like a nail file for homosexuals .

The GLF was structured around a system of anarchic consensus , which made it difficult for the group to reach conclusions on any issue , and heated arguments became commonplace at its meetings . In November 1969 , the group 's membership voted to provide political and financial support to the Black Panthers , an armed African @-@ American leftist group . This was heavily controversial among the GLF , given the homophobic nature of the Black Panthers , and resulted in a walk @-@ out of many senior members , including Martello , Arthur Evans , Arthur Bell , Lige Clarke , and Jack Nichols . That month , Martello was invited to a private meeting of these disaffected GLF members which resulted in the formation of the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) . Although continuing the GLF 's emphasis on taking a confrontational approach to conventional American society and authority , the group was more tightly organized and structured , and focused exclusively on attaining equal rights for gay and lesbian people . The businessman Al Goldstein agreed to invest \$ 25 @,@ 000 in the GAA 's new venture , a newspaper written by , and aimed at , the country 's gay community . It was launched in December 1969 as GAY , and it soon gained a readership of 25 @,@ 000 . Martello contributed a regular column known as " The Gay Witch " , reaching his widest audience to date , also authoring a variety of other articles that appeared in it .

= = = WICA and WADL : 1970 ? 74 = = =

In 1970 , Martello founded the Witches International Craft Associates (WICA) , through which he issued The WICA Newsletter , set up to explain what Witchcraft and Wicca was to the wider public and to serve as a resource through which occultists could contact one another . In April 1970 he appeared on the WNEW @-@ TV Channel 5 documentary series Helluva Town , performing Witchcraft rites with several assistants in Central Park . That year saw one of New York 's first substantial gatherings of occultists , the Festival of Occult Arts , as well as the first Earth Day celebration and the first Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day parade . These events inspired Martello 's desire to hold a public Witchcraft Sabbat celebration . Acting under the auspices of WICA , in late summer he approached the New York City Parks Department asking for permission to hold a " Witch @-@ In " in Sheep Meadow , at the south end of Central Park , on October 31 , 1970 . The Department refused , and when Martello stated that the Witchcraft community would gather there regardless in their capacity as private individuals , he was threatened with police action . Martello gained the legal assistance of the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) , who informed the Parks Department that they were in breach of the First Amendment . The Department subsequently reversed their decision , and the event went ahead .

Inspired by his victory over the Parks Department , Martello founded an organization devoted to campaigning for the religious rights of Witches , the Witches Anti @-@ Defamation League (WADL) , which would eventually be renamed the Alternative Religions Education Network (AREN) . For WADL , he authored an essay titled " The Witch Manifesto " , likely influenced by Carl Wittman 's " Refugees from Amerika : A Gay Manifesto " (1970) , which demanded that the Roman Catholic Church face a tribunal for crimes committed against accused witches in the Early Modern period and that they pay reparations to the modern Witchcraft community for those actions . During this decade he authored a column for Gnostica magazine which was titled " Wicca Basket " , a pun on the phonetic similarity between " Wicca " and " wicker " .

In 1971 , a young gay Wiccan named Eddie Buczynski contacted Martello , and requested initiation

. Due to Buczynski 's inexperience in the religion , Martello turned him down , although developed a friendship with him . Martello introduced Buczynski both to other covens who might initiate him , and to Herman Slater , who would become his long @-@ time partner . Slater was ill with various medical complications , and on one occasion was rehabilitating at the New York University Medical Center when Martello performed a healing ritual on him with the assistance of Buczynski . Martello would come to be known as a regular at The Warlock Shop , an occult store opened by Slater in New York . Through The WICA Newsletter , Martello had met Lady Gwen Thompson , the founder of the New England Covens of Traditionalist Witches (NECTW) , and decided to introduce Buczynski to her , resulting in Buczynski 's initiation into the tradition in Spring 1972 . Martello and Thompson later fell out , with some unconfirmed accounts claiming that it was because he lent her money and she did not pay him back . In October 1972 , Buczynski founded his own tradition of Wicca , termed Welsh Traditionalist Witchcraft , with Martello becoming an early initiate and taking on the name of " Nemesis " within that tradition . In turn , Martello welcomed Buczynski into his La Vecchia tradition , and initiated him through its three degree system .

In November 1972 , Martello lectured at the first Friends of the Craft conference , held at New York 's First Unitarian Church . In April 1973 , he moved to England for six months , where he was initiated and trained in the three degrees of Gardnerian Wicca by the Sheffield coven run by Patricia Crowther and her husband Arnold Crowther . He continued to encourage acceptance of homosexuality within the Pagan and Witchcraft community , authoring an article titled " The Gay Pagan " for Green Egg magazine . He expressed the view that homophobic Wiccans were " sexually insecure " and that they viewed the religion simply as " a ritual means of fornication " . He was also among the prominent male Pagans to endorse feminist and female @-@ only variants of Wicca , such as the Dianic Wicca promoted by Zsuzsanna Budapest .

= = = Later life = = =

During the 1990s , Martello retired from his public work . Doyle White noted that while Martello faded from prominence as the head of the Strega Wicca movement , the tradition gained a " new public advocate " in Raven Grimassi . Martello died of cancer on 29 June 2000 . Bruno was the executrix of his estate .

= = Personal life = =

Lloyd described Martello as " a lanky , hungry scrapper with piercing eyes , the face of a dark angel , and a mouth like a bear trap " , while in her encyclopaedia on Wicca , Rosemary Ellen Guiley described him as " a colourful figure , known for his humor " . Bruno described him as " a loving man , yet sometimes caustic " , stating that to know him " was an honor , and ever a challenge " . He was often noted for his scruffy appearance , with him typically wearing second @-@ hand clothes .

= = = Beliefs = = =

Martello defended the growing rise of feminists in Wicca during the 1970s , criticizing what he deemed as the continual repression of women within the Pagan movement . He also espoused the view that any Pagan who was involved in the U.S. government or military was a hypocrite . He was critical of Wiccans who espoused a division between white magic and black magic , commenting that it had racial overtones and that many of those advocating such a view were racist .

Although aware that historians had criticized the witch @-@ cult hypothesis of Margaret Murray , Martello stood by her claims , believing that the cult had been passed through oral tradition and thus evaded appearing in the textual sources studied by historians . Martello thought it unimportant that many Wiccans had lied about the origins of their beliefs , being quoted by Pagan journalist Margot Adler in her book *Drawing Down the Moon* as having stated " Let 's assume that many people lied about their lineage . Let 's further assume that there are no covens on the current scene that have any historical basis . The fact remains : they do exist now . And they can claim a spiritual lineage

going back thousands of years . All of our pre @-@ Judeo @-@ Christian or Moslem ancestors were Pagans ! "

= = Publications = =