

PART THREE

CRIMINALITY

## HOW AMERICANS IN 1891 BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH MAFIA

The Oxford English Dictionary mentions 1875 as the year when the word Mafia appeared for first time in a London newspaper. The term started spreading worldwide with the mass emigration of Sicilians from their island, following the military *Spedizione dei Mille*<sup>1</sup> headed by Giuseppe Garibaldi that resulted in the annexation of Sicily to the kingdom of Italy. The word Mafia surfaced with great sensation in America in 1891, related to the New Orleans lynchings;<sup>2</sup> a historical event that has been forgotten on both sides of the Atlantic, but that at the time created huge sensation in the press both in Italy and in the United States and caused a break in diplomatic relations between the two countries. In 1958 I happened to be in New Orleans and so I started looking into the collection of old local newspapers preserved in the city's library. I noticed that the newspapers' pages with the reports of those events were rather worn, often held together by tissue paper; a sign that several people must have studied them. I also learned that a local, impartial scholar had published his findings in a journal devoted to the history of Louisiana. Outside New Orleans, when it took place, this episode of violence became the object of congressional investigations; sociological essays; fictionalized history and a lot of diplomatic correspondence between the federal government of the United States and the state of Louisiana. I will give here as

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<sup>1</sup> *Spedizione dei Mille* [Expedition of the Thousand]. This military venture took place in 1860 and became the single most important and almost mythical episode of the *Risorgimento*. Sponsored by the Savoy King Vittorio Emanuele II, a corps of volunteers—the famed *Camicie Rosse* [Red Shirts] under the command of General Garibaldi—left Genoa by ship and landed in Sicily. Here they fought the poorly organized and demoralized army of the kingdom of the Two Sicilies ruled by the Bourbon dynasty. With support in part from the local population, they made their way to the capital, Naples, deposing King Francis II. The kingdom was annexed to the kingdom of Sardinia which, at the time, was the official name of the Savoy state before it was renamed kingdom of Italy in 1861.

<sup>2</sup> See Patrizia Salvetti's *Corda e sapone* ( Roma: Sellerio, 2003); *Rope and Soap* (Bloomington, Bordighera Press, 2016) for the history of lynchings of Italians in the United States.

faithful a report as possible of the events that left a very deep impression on America. It can be said that it was in that moment that the word Mafia became associated with Italians and with time the association has become even stronger and more widespread.

The evening of October 15, 1891, was humid and rainy. The New Orleans Chief of Police David Hennessey<sup>3</sup> was walking home with a friend, a detective from a private agency. While they were walking they did not pay attention to a boy ahead of them who kept turning to check which direction they were going. From time to time the boy would whistle two high notes followed by three low notes. Some said it was the *Marcia Reale*, Italy's national anthem. Not far from Hennessey's house the two split up and went separate ways.

Hennessey lived in a poor section of town. His biography states that his father was a mercenary soldier who had named his son after himself. Allegedly, Hennessey senior was a veteran of the Civil War on the Confederate side under General Godfrey Witzel.<sup>4</sup> After the war, during a period of intense struggle between whites and blacks for the control of the city, he had joined the police. Wounded several times in war, he died in 1867 in a tavern brawl, killed by a certain Guerin who, in turn, was later killed on the steps of a court house. In 1878, the future chief of police killed some unidentified person during a fight in a bar. He was arrested and tried with his cousin Mike but both were acquitted by the jury. Cousin Mike was a policeman but the scandal forced him to resign from the force and eventually ended up getting killed in Houston, where he had become a private investigator.

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<sup>3</sup> David Hennessey (1858-1890). New Orleans's chief of police from 1888 to 1890.

<sup>4</sup> Godfrey Witzel (1835-1884). German American major general in the Union Army and interim mayor of New Orleans.

In 1888 Dave Hennessey was appointed chief of police by a mayor named Shakspeare [sic].<sup>5</sup> Prior to that, he had been working for a private security agency owned by a certain Ferrel. When Ferrel died, Hennessey bought the agency. Both names, Hennessey and Ferrel, are clearly Irish. In that period the biggest American cities were dominated by bands of tough, fearless, violent troublemakers of Irish descent. Many elected politicians were Irish as well; as were the majority of the police, a true force in the city. The law-and-order situation was such that the official police were like a little private army that could not be bothered to catch criminals. Private citizens or businesses that could not count on the protection of the police had to turn for security and protection to one of the innumerable private detective agencies, as did the Sicilians who had emigrated to New Orleans and who quickly learned the local customs.

These details illustrate the environment and the local conditions on the ground. People who hung out in taverns, where one could kill or get killed, could be gangsters one day and become policemen the next without any screening. This made me think back to the time of the Papal States when the authorities recruited into the police bandits that were roaming the countryside if they agreed to drop the old profession.

Hennessey is described as tall, massive and attractive (if you like a face like that of a bulldog), with hazel eyes, black mustache and jet-black hair kept together by shiny grease with bangs on the forehead. His description reminded me of the *bravi*<sup>6</sup> and their hairstyle in the *Promessi sposi*.<sup>7</sup> He was considered a typical

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Shakspeare (1837-1896). Mayor of New Orleans in 1880-1882 and 1888-1892.

<sup>6</sup> *Bravi*. The term indicated private guards hired by local lords as security force in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were usually outlaws. Manzoni in *I promessi sposi* described them as sporting a characteristic look, with long hair and flashy clothes.

<sup>7</sup> *I promessi sposi*. Written by Alessandro Manzoni, the most famous Italian novel (for Italians) was published in several dispersed editions with major changes between 1825 and 1842. The first edition was printed in 1825-6 by printer Vincenzo Ferrario in Milan. The final and definitive

policeman for those days, courageous, merciless and with no morals. In the words of an historian who wrote about him: "Today we would call him a gangster who happened to be on the side of the law." He was the first official American victim of Mafia, thus it is important to describe him with precision. Sicilian immigrants had been suspected of several murders, but the real killers had never been found. Local newspapers talked about them and the vow of *omertà*,<sup>8</sup> the wall of silence that the police could not penetrate. Some of the murders probably were motivated by honor; or by the desire to avenge the death of a friend or relative; or by business disputes. The police, as often is the case in America in these kinds of situations, didn't really put many resources into investigating crimes that involved those damn foreigners. However, it looks like Hennessey made a mistake. He got in the middle of a fight between two Sicilian gangs that were fighting for the control of the fresh-produce business. In those days New Orleans had become the capital of Sicilian immigration. Typical of all immigration waves, one Sicilian would call another and so forth. The southern climate; its looks and character; along with the presence of a large contingent of French and Spanish people; gave the city a distinct Mediterranean flavor; with lots of Catholic churches. This was at the time when no passports, police controls or consular visas were required to immigrate.

The citizens of New Orleans were descendents of pirates, smugglers and other scum of the Caribbean seas. As in many other port cities, morality was rather wobbly; but here it was more so than in other places; mostly as a consequence of

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edition was published by printer Guglielmini e Radaelli in Milan in 1840. The events narrated take place in the Milan and Lake Como areas around 1630 during the Spanish domination.

<sup>8</sup> *Omertà*: the implicit vow by an entire community of non-cooperation with the authorities. The term derives from *uomo* [man] and refers to the fundamental property of manliness. *Omertoso* would be the opposite of a *snitch*.

the Civil War and the defeat of the South, which had brought turmoil and a period of oppression by the winners on the losers.

Brothels had sprouted on every corner so brazenly and loudly that they caused consternation in other parts of a more hypocritical America. It is no surprise that Sicilian criminality saw New Orleans as an attractive new turf for its activities and also as a safe harbor, far from the *anti-banditismo*<sup>9</sup> campaign launched by the new Italian state after the unification. Certainly, among them were honest citizens but these tended to settle mostly in the countryside where they created important agricultural centers. (Edmondo Mayor de Planches,<sup>10</sup> one of the first high level Italian diplomats to write about Italian immigrants, visited them a few years later and left a historical description.) However, it is also a fact that the Italian consulate had a list of criminals, at least a hundred-name long, that were sought for extradition back to Italy. The ambassador wanted to share it with the local authorities but these didn't know what to do with it or how to handle the entire situation. At the time of the Hennessy murder trial, which turned out to be the real fulcrum of the tragedy, the list had grown to 1,100. The consul was successful only in the case of a notorious bandit from Calabria, Giovanni Esposito, who, according to the accusations, had committed eighteen murders in Italy. In Louisiana he kidnapped for ransom a protestant minister, Rev. Rose. To prove that the pastor was in his hands, and also show his determination, he cut his ears off and sent them to the family.

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<sup>9</sup> *Banditismo*. In the years after the annexation of the south to the kingdom of Italy, bands of outlaws were controlling the territory and the population in large swaths of the countryside, especially in Calabria and Sicily. In addition to criminal intent, these gangs also had — albeit vague — political goals of resistance and self-determination in opposition to the oppressive regime imposed by the new northern regime.

<sup>10</sup> Edmondo Mayor de Planches (1851-1920). He was ambassador to the United States between 1901 and 1903.

Esposito was discovered thanks to a tip from an informant while he was living in New Orleans under a new name. He had a nice life and a second wife who swore he was a great husband and father. After Hennessey arrested him and the consul obtained the extradition, his friends collected several thousand of dollars to pay for his lawyer and tried everything possible to keep him in the country. Rumors among the population had that Esposito had been betrayed by a certain Abbruzzo who was later found murdered. The police could not find his killer. Esposito was deported to Italy, tried, sentenced to life and imprisoned at Santo Stefano.<sup>11</sup> The history of his trial and his portrait were reported in the periodical *Illustrazione Italiana*<sup>12</sup> of 1890. After that, I don't know what happened to him. His reputation on this side of the world is that he was the person responsible for importing Mafia to New Orleans and the United States.

This was Hennessey's first battle with the Sicilian Mafia. The second battle led to his death. The war for the control of the fresh-produce business was waged by two families, Provenzano and Matranga. Apparently, Hennessey backed the former. One episode accelerated the events: the Matrangas were ambushed by the Provenzanos while they were leaving the port in a horse-drawn carriage. Many shots were fired and one of the Matrangas lost a leg. At the trial, the Matrangas realized that Hennessey was backing the Provenzanos. Among other clues, the lavish treatment and excellent food enjoyed by the Provenzanos in jail were attributed to Hennessey's influence. Hennessey was a member of the Red Lantern Club (one can easily guess what kind of place this club was.) Ostensibly it had a social mission but one cannot avoid noticing that red lanterns were the common signal for brothels. Red Lantern is the generic name given to a district

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<sup>11</sup> The little island of Santo Stefano, where a penitentiary was located, is a few miles from the port of Naples.

<sup>12</sup> *L'illustrazione italiana* (1873 - 1962). Published in Milan, it was one of the best selling illustrated weeklies.

where brothels line the streets and prostitution is practiced openly—despite the laws—under the protection of corrupt police. (In those days their locations were reported in a tourist guide called *Blue Book*,<sup>13</sup> which is now a rarity sought after by collectors.) Among the club's members was a certain Joseph Macheca, most likely from Malta, a man with power and influence, who, in association with other Sicilians, owned ships for the transport of fruit in the Gulf of Mexico. He warned Hennessey not to get involved in the business of other people and particularly that of the Sicilians or he “would end up in a box.” Hennessey dismissed the threat. On the evening of October 15, 1891, as he was about to step into his house, Hennessey was targeted by a volley of shots from rifles and pistols. He managed to return fire with his pistol as two of the assailants approached him and shot him at close range. He then stumbled for a few steps toward the friend that, upon hearing the shots, had run back to help him. When asked who the killers were Hennessey replied: “It was them.” “Them who?” “*Dagoes*.”<sup>14</sup> This was the derogatory term used to indicate Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and in general all southern Europeans with darker skin and a foreign accent. In this case the accusation pointed clearly to the Italians. Hennessey did not personally recognize any of the killers, since it is (still) standard practice for these operations to be carried out by hired gunmen that cannot be identified. Moreover, the killers wore the typical kerchief that conceals the bottom half of the face, leaving only a small slit open for the eyes, under a hat's wide brim. As long as Sicilian immigrants in New Orleans kept to themselves and took care of their rivalries of honor and business among themselves, the New Orleans police (a misnomer) weren't particularly concerned. But when it became known

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<sup>13</sup> Author Unknown. *Blue Book*. New Orleans: Thomas C. Anderson, circa 1911.

<sup>14</sup> The footnote in the original text explains the origin of the term: “*Dago* (pronounced *deigo*) is probably the metathesis of *Diego*, a very common name among Iberians and in countries they dominated, Sicily included.”



that Mafia was involved in Chief Hennessey's assassination, popular resentment started growing and became so intense that it eventually led to one of the worst cases of lynching in history. Carlo Matranga was probably the most notorious of the suspects and was in fact the first to be arrested. He had a bomb-proof alibi: that evening he was playing cards with some *paesani*. In a way his alibi was a bit too strong and it seemed planned. The suspicion against him was based on the fact that the abandoned house from which some of shots were fired had been rented with his money. To get rid of the indictment, Matranga hired one of the many private detectives that, due to lax rules, were working in a gray area between private and public law enforcement agencies. When Matranga was acquitted, the initiatives of detective Dominic O'Malley—the man he had hired—became the basis for the accusations of jury corruption. O'Malley, by the way, was Irish.<sup>15</sup> Twenty other Italians were arrested together with Matranga. Some were friends of his: Antonio Scaffidi, already known to the police for attempted extortion of a merchant named Messina; Emanuele Polizzi, otherwise identified with the name Polissi; Pietro Monastero, a landlord; Bastian Incardona, whose brother was working for Matranga; Charles Traina, James Caruso and Antonio Marchese. Antonio Bagnetto, a guard at the fruit market who for his superior intellectual abilities—he knew both languages and translated for the other men—was called *il professore*, was found in possession of three revolvers. All the names were of Sicilian origin. Others involved were Loretto Comitez<sup>16</sup>[sic] and Frank Romero, presumably Hispanic, although in those days it was common for people to change name upon receiving U.S. citizenship, a practice that is often mentioned in the correspondence of many Italian consuls to the central

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<sup>15</sup> Italian readers would not recognize the name as Irish, thus the author added the detail for clarity.

<sup>16</sup> Loretto Comitz.

government. Alternatively, one should always be aware of the chance of simple spelling errors. Marchese was the father of the boy accused of giving signals for the ambush by whistling in code. Another one of the crew was Rocco Geraci, who had already been accused of killing an Italian shoemaker. With the exception of Matranga and the Maltese Machecca, the rest were petty criminals who, at one point or another, had had problems with the police. An incident that took place while they were behind bars gives an idea of the kind of atmosphere at the time. In the discovery phase, a certain Duffy, an Irishman and a friend of Hennessey, picked one of the accused to carry out his personal vendetta. He applied for a permit to visit in jail Antonio Scoffietti, whom he blamed more than anyone else for the death of his friend; and shot him with a gun, wounding him only superficially. Duffy himself was arrested and tried but got away with only a few months behind bars.

The chief of the Pinkerton Agency<sup>17</sup> reported a story, widely circulated in Italy as well, that I personally find questionable and that was never proved to be true. He claimed to be a friend of Hennessey and said he had planted a spy in the jail where the Sicilians were being held. The spy's name was Di Dio. His cover was as a counterfeit expert who had been jailed after being mistreated by the police. Ostensibly, he struck up a friendship with the Sicilians persuading them he was a member of organized crime and managed to get the story of the assassination conspiracy from Polizzi (or Polissi). The newspapers of the time did not report anything about it. Polizzi, in all likelihood, was frazzled and on the verge of mental collapse. During the debate in court he suffered from seizures. He first confessed but later withdrew his confession, which was then thrown out by the

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<sup>17</sup> Pinkerton National Detective Agency: Founded in 1850 it was for decades the most notorious private security agency in the country, often working in concert with government law-enforcement agencies to maintain public order, disrupt labor strikes and conduct clandestine operations of dubious legality.

judge. This entire episode feels like a cheap mystery novel or some dramatization thereof; something that would fit a whodunit play, but that leaves serious historians very skeptical. The truth is that there was no need for spies. Everyone believed the Sicilians were guilty and everybody expected the jury would find them guilty.

At that time the city had a vigilance committee appointed by the mayor composed of fifty members, charged with looking into public safety issue. Its chairperson initially was E.H. Farrar (an Irish surname) and, later, a certain Flower. The committee was the peculiar re-incarnation of similar volunteer groups that, in other occasions, had taken over the reins of armed control in the city in periods when the police seemed paralyzed and City Hall was similarly indecisive. The history of New Orleans before 1900 shows several periods when these kinds of arrangements had taken place, with the corollary of erudite debates by American jurists about the right of the people to take direct control of public order when elected officials are patently derelict in their duties. In Italy we have had similar situations even in the twentieth century. History doesn't care about justifications or reprimands: it is what it is. However, we should remember that the apparition of a similar explosion of popular furor by irregular forces in New Orleans had already taken place only a few years earlier with the White League,<sup>18</sup> a movement that fought against the alleged excesses of the Union administration after the victory in the Civil War. These forces, one way or another, always appeal to the supremacy of white Anglo Americans. In this case they targeted Italians. Professor Giovanni Cecchetti,<sup>19</sup> a personal friend who

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<sup>18</sup> The White League was active in the years 1874 and 1875 in Louisiana. It was one of many paramilitary organizations whose goal was the defeat of Republican politicians in local elections.

<sup>19</sup> Giovanni Cecchetti (1922-1998). Professor of Italian at Tulane University, Stanford University and finally at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he was chair of the Italian department from 1969 to 1977.

works at Tulane University in New Orleans, hypothesized that this popular uprising was connected to the election of President Grover Cleveland<sup>20</sup> who had campaigned with an anti-foreigner agenda.

In these circumstances the official function of the committee was to secure law and order. In reality it fostered a climate of tension and danger in Italian neighborhoods where, in those days, the windows and the doors of houses and businesses were kept shut. The trial lasted from November 20, 1890, until March 13 of the following year. It took two juries to reach a verdict. The first one was dissolved after nine days due to irregularities. Apparently the Italian community, or at least the best organized group, the one called Mafia, was able to collect enough money to hire top lawyers and private investigators. The court heard 319 witnesses. The judge in person exonerated Matranga. For three of the accused the outcome was a hung jury, and, according the local laws, they were either to be retried or let go. The others were all found not guilty.

When the verdict was announced, the city erupted with outrage and cries for justice. The revenge plan was organized in the open with the vigilance committee taking responsibility for all that would ensue. We know the names of the organizers who signed a manifesto published by the newspapers. (A few years later, the main organizer was elected governor.) We also know who incited the populace; who distributed the arms; and who led the armed volunteers. The way the plan unfolded shows it was put together carefully to make sure it would appear it fell within the boundaries of legality, or at least that its execution would avoid implicating directly the organizers. For this reason, for instance, some of the Italians were taken from the prison and formally handed to the crowd, so as

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen Grover Cleveland (1837--1908). He served as president of the United States for two separate, noncontiguous terms in 1885-1889 and 1893-1897.

to avoid the possible accusation that they were killed by identifiable individuals inside the jail.

George C. Parke died at age 87 in Tampa, Florida, a few years ago. In a sealed envelope, to be opened after his death, he revealed that he had lived in New Orleans where he had been part of a squad of twelve people armed with rifles and to whom the lynching's organizers assigned the goal of killing the Italians. He also said that he had been living in hiding his whole life in fear of retribution by the Italians. Could it be true? None of the organizers was alive at that time and even if someone had been, nobody would have ever confirmed his version.

In an exclusive club in New Orleans, a couple of days ago, I met the son of attorney A., the lawyer who defended the Italians. He looked quite nervous and, in too many nervous words, told me that his father had taken that case as a pique. After the assassination of Hennessey he had volunteered to be one of the prosecutors but was rebuffed. Thus, to show his professional skills, he took the opposite role and succeeded in getting the not-guilty verdict. I reminded to him that, based on what I had read in the local newspapers, his father, during the closing argument boasted that he was a personal friend of the victims and that he would have never accepted to defend the accused if he doubted their innocence. I am not sure whether for the son historical truth trumped his antipathy for Sicilians: what was evident was that he didn't hold much respect for his father.

The reason for the massacre was the indignation of the whole city at the verdict. Mobs do not normally follow the light of reason or the law. The jury, instead, in this case, used reason and the result was a careful, cautious and free decision. The jurors were all native New Orleans citizens, of French, Anglo-Saxon or German ancestry and, probably, a Jew, Seligman. There were no members of the Italian community. Regardless of this, the jury was accused of being corrupt. Italians or, better, Mafia was believed to have paid large sums of money to

ensure the acquittals or at least a hung jury. In old documents, yellowed by time and typed in the tiniest of fonts, I read the interviews with the jurors. At first they all refused to talk, as was their right. They were unanimous in saying that they were not convinced by the evidence presented by the prosecutor and that they made their decision without pressure. Some complained about the low cultural level of fellow jurors, who were basically illiterate and, conceptually and intellectually, inadequate to the task at hand. They all denied they had received money from the Mafia. Nevertheless, the press published figures that even today look ridiculous. One of the jurors allegedly received \$150, another one \$500. I am not claiming here that a conscience is necessarily more expensive, but I would like to note that to risk one's life is worth more than \$150, even if it's only for the conscience. The risk of being the target of violence for the jurors was indeed real to the point that some of them had to leave the city to protect themselves, at least temporarily. The jury's foreman, Mr. Seligman, a professional jeweler, took a coach to a train station near New Orleans. Due to a mishap, he found himself walking in public. He was recognized and was surrounded by a menacing crowd. Luckily, a police officer was nearby and intervened after calling for reinforcements. Other jurors hired armed guards to protect them even in their own homes. It took a while for things to settle down. The son of the lawyer who defended the Italians assured me that his father's business was not affected negatively, indeed, it boomed, as he gained a reputation as the kind of lawyer who could handle hopeless cases. Anyway, if corruption had taken place, it is nevertheless sure that the Sicilians of New Orleans had learned a very important lesson very quickly: American justice in those days was worth its weight in gold, and in order to get justice they had to fork out all the gold they could. I am not claiming they were moral individuals, I claim, though, that they were quite smart.

A crowd calculated to be around 6,000 people, a big number for a small city, gathered in front of the statue of the patriot Henry Clay<sup>21</sup> on Canal Street, to this day the most elegant street in New Orleans. It was March 15, 1891. The population was angry at the verdict that acquitted all the Italians accused of murdering Hennessey. Probably everything would have ended with shouts and maybe some fist fights if it hadn't been for an organization, the so-called Fifty, which prepared, planned, directed and quite openly took charge of the operation. "When law enforcement is lacking, the people have the right to take control of public interest and see that justice is done." This is a theory that has surfaced often and in many different times and places around the world, and it was applied that very day. Was it justice? Or wasn't rather a barbaric act? History is what it is and it allows for no corrections. No argument will give back life and honor, if indeed they had honor, to the Sicilians who were massacred. Later, and after long and protracted fights, the American government paid the sum of 125,000 Lira (in 1891 the currency was the gold-Lira) to the families of three victims who at that time were still Italian citizens. All the protagonists are dead and probably their descendents meet in some political club and shake hands at a costume ball during Mardi Gras. But in New Orleans people still talk about it, albeit in hushed tones.

If we could foresee the final outcome of our passions, or what our sacrifices will produce, including the compromises with our own conscience, it is probable we would never get much done, or, at least, nothing great and nothing big. In and by itself a crowd is nothing. A crowd does not think or decide or act. But there is always someone who directs and leads it. At times, a crazy rider grabs the reins and in those cases we know how things end up. In Renaissance Florence we have

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<sup>21</sup> Henry Clay (1777-1852). Congressman and senator from Kentucky for several terms, he also served as speaker of the House. He served as secretary of state from 1825 to 1829.

the written accounts of events when (as Florentine historians told us) leaders called the people to gatherings. This usually was the beginning of arson, vandalism, looting and killing. The long speech given that day by in New Orleans by a self-appointed leader inflamed the souls. The crowd had only a marginal role, limited to shouts and threats, but with its presence it supported the tragic operation with the real operatives organized in an armed team. At the right time they picked up the arms that had been kept in storage nearby and used them as badges to get through the mob. Only twenty five people entered the jail where the Italians were kept. Nobody in a position of authority bothered to protect the prisoners: not the governor, not the mayor and not even the new chief of police who, predictably, had a personal animus against them. The prison warden, when he saw the crowd and the armed squad, opened the cells of the Italian prisoners and told them to hide in the women's section. From the reports of the journalists of the time and from the autopsies of the victims, it is possible to reconstruct what happened to each of the prisoners. Only one of the Sicilians was lucky enough to be able to mingle with the common prisoners who stayed behind on the ground floor. He wasn't recognized and thus was saved. Everyone else was in a state of sheer terror. Who wouldn't be? Some incredible things happened. Sunseri<sup>22</sup> and Polizzi were found inside a dog shed so small that people wondered how two human bodies could possibly fit in it. Another one, Incardona, crouched in a fetal position, hid in a garbage bin and survived. Macheca, Scaffidi and Marchese Sr. ran back to the third floor where their cells were but found them locked. The corridor leading to the cells was exposed to the lynch squad that, as soon as they saw them, started shooting. Macheca brandishing a club tried to break the lock of a cell where he thought he could

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<sup>22</sup> It is possible the author may refer to Salvatore Sinceri.



protect himself. He was found dead clutching the club, his hand smashed by a bullet. Marchese Jr., the child who was the alleged lookout for the ambush, was recognized but was spared due to his young age. Matranga and Charles Patorno were able to hide only to re-emerge later, dirty and slimy, from another room where they had hidden under a pile of garbage. They also survived.

In New Orleans a descendant of one of the victims of this tragedy told me that Matranga later managed to become a big shot in the local longshoremen union. He was murdered by a professional killer from Chicago, hired by an enemy faction inside the same organization. Before dying he shouted to his son: "Get that son of a bitch." The son gave chase and shot the killer. According to the witnesses, the wound his son inflicted onto the killer was identical to the wound suffered by Matranga: two bullets to the heart, the only two that were fired. The implication may be that both belonged to the same school.

The group that entered the jail placed sentries at the door and didn't allow access to anybody. The vigilantes immediately killed three Italians but, in order to avoid being singled out and to assert the democratic principle of popular justice, they brought two of them outside and gave them to the crowd. One of them was Polizzi, one of the strangest characters in the trial, during which he kept moving and shaking uncontrollably, screaming and shouting for the entire time. Today he would certainly be committed to a mental institution for epilepsy. He was the only one who, approached by a fake Italian criminal—a Pinkerton spy—allegedly confessed he committed the crime, a confession he later recanted. He was brought out of jail held up by the shirt collar by a gigantic individual, someone the press described only as "a well known cotton grower." It could be that the name was not mentioned to protect him and other members of his family; or because he was part of the agrarian aristocracy that shared control of the city (but that was slowly surrendering power to the industrial neo-capitalists from

the north). Polizzi was taken to the Old Quarter to a street corner that borders Canal Street and hanged from one of the gas lamps that, to this day, make the area so charming and picturesque for the delight of tourists.

Often, as I was wandering in that part of town, I asked myself if the lamp in front of me may be the one where the poor epileptic was hanged. One particular was reported by the press, and it is so crude and realistic that it helps explain the madness of the whole thing. As soon as the body of Polizzi was hanged from the street lamp, the crowd, of its own initiative and in an act worthy of them, started grabbing him to take a souvenir of the event. So, they ripped off shoes and clothes until he was left naked. But apparently that wasn't enough because eventually his body was cut up in parts. Maybe in an old New Orleans house, preserved under a glass dome or between the pages of a book, there still are strips of skin or scalp, with the date of the fateful day neatly written on them.

The second public victim was Bagnetto. Back in the prison, when people approached, he pretended to be dead but he could not fake it long enough. He was dragged out of the jail with a rope around his neck. The mob decided to hang him from a tree. A child climbed up to tie the knot, but the branch snapped so the operation had to be repeated a second time until it finally succeeded.

After Bagnetto, six other Sicilians were taken from the prison and killed one by one: Geraci, Monastero, Traina, Caruso, Comitez and Romero. At 9:15 AM the massacre was over. There were no more people to kill. The day ended with a triumphal parade culminating with a speech, given from the platform of a statue, to inform everyone, at 11:00 am, that the execution was complete. When it was all over, eleven people had been lynched. After the tragedy, none of the relatives dared go looking for the bodies. Only a woman, Polizzi's companion, went to the prison while thousands of people were still crowding the area with bellicose and hostile disposition. The woman must have been half crazy herself. The reporters

noted that she was wearing a worn-out print cotton dress with a wool blue shawl on her head and a yellow ribbon around her neck. She was in her mid thirties, with a Mediterranean complexion. With the exceptions of two dead that ended up in a common grave, the bodies were returned to the families who gave them funerals, some quite elaborate and some in the city cathedral. Apparently, in attendance were not only relatives, friends and other Italians, but also Anglo-Saxons. According to a reporter who visited the Italian quarter near Poydras Market<sup>23</sup> by the port, the survivors “showed neither anger nor fear, although they said those few hours felt like years. Everyone thanked God for having been saved from such a horrible destiny.” I imagine that quite a few candles were lit in the New Orleans cathedral. In the pockets of the dead, a rosary, images of saints and even a small statue of Saint Joseph were found. In the pockets of Comitez, instead, a German calendar was found.

After the verdict, suspicion and animosity were high against the jurors. Some were openly accused by the press of having been corrupted by Mafia. It appears that the price of a conscience in those days was rather low but, conscience notwithstanding, a vote to acquit the Italians certainly meant troubles for the rest of one’s life.

The jury’s foreman, as I mentioned earlier, was almost killed by the mob that recognized him while he was trying to get out of town by train. All the jurors who were interviewed denied there had been attempts to corrupt them and maintained that the decision to acquit depended only on the fact that the prosecutor had failed to present convincing evidence. One of the jurors gave the most eloquent answer to a journalist: “There were two black folks who claimed they recognized the killers. But, how can I believe the word of two blacks against

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<sup>23</sup> Also known as the Poydras Street Market, it was an early market area in New Orleans.

that of a white man?" The detective hired by Matranga to find evidence to support his alibi was also forced to leave town for a while.

The Italian quarter is centered around Orsoline Street,<sup>24</sup> that is, ironically, the place where the first proper girls from France found a home and an education in America. As soon as the news of the verdict reached the quarter, Italian flags were flying in front of all windows. But when, later, after the massacre, the reporters stormed the area, they found that all the flags had disappeared while the women were busy taking care of the green grocery stores and the men had all gone into hiding.

The city-appointed commission charged with investigating the facts didn't find anything wrong. The chairperson of the commission, who was believed by most to be corrupt, was expelled from the chamber of commerce. The American government was forced to explain to the Italian government that the autonomous sovereignty of the state of Louisiana precluded federal intervention; therefore Washington couldn't even provide that the killers would be tried in court. Diplomatic relations between Italy and the United States were broken for a time; then, the American government paid the puny sum I mentioned at the beginning. In the state of Louisiana, the organizer of the lynching was elected governor. Historians emphasize the fact that, after the massacre, Mafia continued to commit crimes but never attacked the police directly. That is to say: what happened was not right, but at least it was efficient.

The readers are probably asking: what is the point of talking about those sad pages? And who do I think was right: organized crime (that actually did have a fair trial) or those who took the law into their own hands? These are good and

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<sup>24</sup> Congregazione delle Orsoline is a Catholic organization founded by nuns in 1535 with the mission to educate young girls. In the course of the centuries the order prospered and created a world-wide network of schools for girls and young women and is now present in every continent.

heavy questions, and, of course, I have given them a lot of thought. It is a fact that the episode always made a deep impression on me from the moment I found out about it. When I was in New Orleans I searched those places and tried to envision what happened. Nowadays, all is quiet for Italians in New Orleans, although American writers are still talking about it. The impeccable newspaper collection at the public library (with extremely polite service) counts innumerable documents with articles on Mafia updated to today. As far as who was right and who was wrong, I side with Alessandro Manzoni<sup>25</sup> who said that no one has yet invented the knife that can separate exactly right from wrong. For me it is enough to say that this historical episode is to be considered as evidence of the fact that the immigration was a tragedy; that the difficulties of communication among different peoples and races are immense; and that, for sure, humans are not kind to one another; particularly when they gather in groups and don't think for themselves but give in to group thinking. I am saying all these things a bit crudely, and, provisionally.

*New Orleans, January-February 1958*

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<sup>25</sup> Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873). Novelist, poet and playwright. He is considered by Italians one of the country's greatest writers. He is best known for his novel *I promessi sposi* (1840) which was instrumental and enormously influential in reforming the Italian language. To this day he is regarded as a master of prose.