

## A BIOGRAPHY OF SALVATORE LUCANIA ALSO KNOWN AS LUCKY LUCIANO

A new biography of Lucky Luciano, *The Luciano Story*,<sup>1</sup> recently landed on my table. The famous gangster, whom Italy is now honored (and burdened) to host, and the crime syndicate are also the subject of a Broadway show I saw not long ago; and of the movie *New York Confidential*;<sup>2</sup> based on a book with the same title written by journalists Lee [sic] and Mortimer that came out a couple of years ago. All these coincidences made me revisit this particular aspect of American life and the questions that surround it: how much of what is told about gangster life is true? How important is it in the life of the United States? And what does all this mean? First of all, I wonder where the information comes from. As we know, the number one rule of criminals is to not attract any attention. Gangsters surround themselves with silence; they use the phone cautiously in fear that their conversations may be monitored and; as far as I know, there are no collections of gangsters' letters. The only physical documentation available is lists of their clothes and hotel bills. Their operations presumably must be recorded by some form of bookkeeping, although nothing has ever been brought to light during trials. At the same time, every single witness that has testified in court against them was a criminal himself, involved in the same activities, and therefore with very little credibility. In order to find out what gangsters do, one must spend time with them and participate in the same activities, and in fact the little we know comes from spies, traitors, prostitutes and informants. The first

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<sup>1</sup> Salvatore Lucania, also known as Lucky Luciano (1897-1962). He is considered the founder of modern Mafia in America. He was instrumental in dividing the control of illegal operations in New York among five families; and in setting up the *Commission*, the ruling board composed of the heads of families that acted in the best common interest.

• *The Luciano Story*. Sid Feder and Joachim Joensen. David McKay, New York, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Confidential*. Directed by Roussel Rouse. Edward Small Productions, 1955. Based on the homonymous novel by Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer. Crown Publishers, New York, 1951.

operations of the little Mafia of Giuseppe Masseria<sup>3</sup> concerned the illegal smuggling of fellow Sicilians to the United States. Once they had settled down, their main occupation was extortion of small retail businesses and protection from possible troubles, troubles that the Mafia itself would cause. It is the old concept of the medieval tribute in a society dominated by the powerful, still present in a modern society that was still in part medieval.

Many gangsters of the new generation, like Luciano, were born in Italy but went to crime school in the slums of the Lower East Side, starting in first grade. They would graduate from the juvenile penal system and, finally, complete their academic training in penitentiaries where they were taught by elderly, experienced criminals. Here they would learn how the system works and how to adapt the criminal networks to take advantage of the new developments in society. The kind of *gangsterism* [sic] invented by Lucky Luciano had a broader vision and bigger ambitions. To begin, one must bear in mind that organized crime, or, as I call it here, *gangsterism*, flourished in response to the law that for several years prohibited the sale of alcohol, the period known as *Prohibition*.<sup>4</sup> The law was very unpopular even among the citizens who had voted for a senator or house representative who, for political opportunism, supported the law. Paradoxically, in those circumstances organized crime provided a social service. Luciano and others jumped to the opportunity to supply liquors, wine and beer to a whole nation thirsty for alcohol and deeply unhappy with the new restrictions. This was the turning point for all gangsters. They were no longer the small bore Mafiosi of yore, illiterate and narrow minded. The new generation was thinking bigger and had sharper organizational skills, indispensable to manage a web of intricate and complex commercial

3 Giuseppe Masseria (1886-1931). Also known as *Joe the Boss* was an Italian criminal who escaped to America in 1903. He became associated with the Mafia and eventually became the head of one of the New York families and the first *boss of bosses*.

4 The 18th Amendment to the American Constitution was passed in 1920. It prohibited the manufacture, sale, transport, import or export of alcoholic beverages. It is not generally well known that the amendment did not prohibit the purchase or consumption of alcohol. It was repealed in 1933 by the adoption of the 21st Amendment.

networks. To make things even more difficult was the fact that their business was entirely illegal and, therefore, required secrecy; with safe houses and hide-outs; far from the eye of law enforcement. A national enterprise of this kind required executives with great talent; able to adapt instantly to new circumstances and maintain control over clandestine distilleries and transportation networks, active mostly at night; that reached all the way into the heart of the cities and from there to individual outlets. It was also necessary to bribe the police in order to ensure a certain degree of safety and, of course, to use violence to punish traitors; induce fear in possible spies and get rid of the competition. Countless murders have been attributed to the big bosses of this enterprise, although the large majority of the victims were also mobsters, often from competing gangs. Very few of these crimes were committed against innocent citizens, and the death toll for these was certainly lower than that for car accidents due to drunk driving or the distraction of drivers who fool around with a girl friend instead of paying attention to the road.

In the absence of reliable sources of information, with a bit of imagination, American journalists have tried to reconstruct the lives of the new generation of gangsters. It's a little bit like the *Storia della rivoluzione americana* [sic] by Carlo Borra,<sup>5</sup> who filled his pages with passages from speeches by Washington and Jefferson who, if they could read the book, would be quite surprised to find in it things they never said. Lucky Luciano's biography, for instance, is full of dialogues that, had they been recorded with a tape recorder, would sound very plausible. In reality all they show is the virtuosity and creativity of the writers and their knowledge of street slang.

There are two kinds of wrongs in analyzing this phenomenon. Some, with an anti-American agenda, tend to simplify things greatly and see the entire life of this continent as dominated by gangsters. Some minimize it, as if it were irrelevant and meaningless. The entire gangster world is not particularly large but what is really important is the fact that it's not going away despite the efforts of law enforcement. It is a phenomenon

5 Carlo Borra (1766-1837). Historian. *Storia della guerra dell'indipendenza degli Stati Uniti d'America*. D. Colas, Paris, 1809. First Italian edition: Milano, Vincenzo Ferrario, 1819.

on the margin of American life; it is being fought vigorously; it has been squeezed into a corner; forced into a clandestine life, in hiding and invisible; except for the times when it explodes in extreme forms of violence. The mob only dominates certain environments and more precisely the least American of them: the areas of cities with recent immigrants that have not yet been assimilated. But despite this fact, the phenomenon is connected to American life and it is a product of American life itself. The criminal element is present in all societies; however, the form that crime takes in American life is America's own and it will never change until America remains America. Take for instance the chapter in Lucky Luciano's biography about the blossoming of a new modern mentality in Sicilian Mafia. When Luciano was a boy, Mafia was a culture and a habit limited to Italian immigrants. The boss, Giuseppe Masseria, enjoyed playing traditional card games with friends; didn't own a car and wouldn't dream of sitting in a box at the Metropolitan Opera House; nor of going to the track to bet on horses in the company of a flashy and dumb starter wrapped in a mink fur coat. He would never think of expanding his operations, based in New York, to Chicago or Los Angeles or Miami. Forget then about keeping on top of the developments that took place after World War II, when the networks expanded all the way to Italy, France, Turkey and China. Giuseppe Masseria was eliminated in a non-descript Italian restaurant while Luciano, who had ordered the hit, was washing his hands in the men's room. From that day he has come a long way, engaged in a journey that is perfectly compatible with that of America and mirrors her expansionist policies, her vitality, her risk-taking mentality and finally the vagaries of political life.

The question everybody asks is why Luciano was set free after World War II, after being sentenced to thirty-five years in prison following a world-famous trial whose prosecutor was New York's Attorney General Thomas Dewey.<sup>6</sup> It is definitely a mysterious *affaire* that not even the recent biography can explain. The widespread rumor, never disputed—by the way—was that during World War II Luciano helped

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas E. Dewey (1902-1971). Attorney general of New York state from 1937 to 1942; governor from 1943 to 1954. He ran twice unsuccessfully in presidential elections.

the U.S. Army intelligence before and after the invasion of Sicily. With his help, American intelligence established solid relationships with the local Mafia bosses. Another possible explanation attributes the judicial pardon to the presidential election in which Dewey was a candidate. The gangsters' real strength is not in their viciousness or their courage. It resides in the fact that American society, or at least a significant portion thereof, needs certain services that are prohibited by law. In order to provide those services it is necessary to find men willing to take the risk. *Gangsterism* was and is still today the expression of a form of social dissent, not simply a case of thugs and bullies who impose themselves onto society (although this aspect does exist in some particular cases). The gangsters' principal activity consists in supplying the paying public with forbidden forms of entertainment. At this time in America, one of the biggest forms of entertainment is gambling, from lotteries to horse races and other sports events. Gambling is a pleasure that attracts an enormous public: maybe it is a metaphor for our own lives. Don't we gamble when we get married; when we choose one career rather than another; and even when we accept an invitation to dinner? And let's not even talk about decisions like investing in real estate; or buying merchandise on sale that we don't immediately need but that, we hope, we will already own when the prices rise. Morally there is the additional fact that nobody forces a gambler to gamble. Just providing the opportunity is not like hurting someone intentionally. No one has ever heard of gangsters that would threaten people who don't gamble. Organized crime also engages in another, rather unsavory, activity: providing mercenary love, where suppliers are generally not the cream of society. This is a topic that would require a long disquisition, but suffice it to say that American gangsters are doing in this country what many ancient and modern states consider useful for the public good. From the documentation presented at the trial, it would be hard to conclude that Luciano—who was tried and convicted by Dewey for this crime—was any worse than people in other countries that practice the same trade openly with a license and with no need for secrecy.

My conviction that gangsters perform a social function has been reinforced by an additional issue: narcotics. Recently, I read several

proposals supported by medical doctors who maintain that the government should supply narcotics at a fair price to addicts, under strict surveillance. The most dangerous aspect of drug addiction is the need to procure money, at any cost, to buy the substance. The addicts pay exorbitant prices to the dealers and, in order to get the money, they end up as prostitutes, thieves and murderers. These are awful consequences. It is nevertheless true that it's impossible to correct these consequences by prohibition alone. When laws and society reveal themselves to be inadequate, full of errors and unrealistic absurdities, there come the gangsters, ready to fill a desperate need. Obviously, they do so with moral indifference, brutal callousness and vampirism; which are made even worse by the risk and the secrecy of illegal activities. With gambling, thus, it is not surprising that many newspapers in New York support the public take-over of this business; with the goal of absorbing into its coffers the millions of dollars that end up in the gangsters' pockets.

There have been and there still are other gangster activities that would be difficult to list under the rubric of social usefulness. Organized crime is involved in counterfeit currency distribution; extortion of labor unions; and protection of unscrupulous business people, among others. But even in these sectors, gangsters would not be able to operate unless the general climate of society didn't give them the opportunity. One last thing must be said: in America the tradition of fighting outlaws is an old and established duty that is often left to a free press. It is not a coincidence that one of the few activities immune from the effects of organized crime is precisely journalism.

*New York, March 16, 1955*

## MAFIA OR THE MORAL SEPARATISM OF SICILIANS

The American public is convinced that all over the United States there exists a very well organized association of criminals called Mafia, composed of Italians. Instead, according to the experts, this association is composed mostly of people of Sicilian origin and not Italians in general. Complaints and protestations about this generalization by Italian American newspapers and organizations of descendants of Italians have had no effect whatsoever: first of all, because Italian Americans are not as well organized and powerful as, for instance, the Jews; second, because the Italian-language press has limited circulation and practically no influence in society at large; and finally, because Italian American associations lack in members and resources. But, to top it all, these protestations have little or no credibility because Italian Americans have never denounced, or manifested their opposition to, or distanced themselves from the various local versions of Mafias in their backyards. There has never been a campaign in the Italian language press; there has never been a public meeting; there has never been an Italian American judge or a political leader at the head of a movement who fought and denounced those among them who victimized—first of all—the Italian communities, even before they victimized American society. The proof is in a book by Frederic Sondern,<sup>1</sup> also available in Italian. This book can be called the first public indictment against Sicilians by a branch of the Federal Department of Narcotics [sic].<sup>2</sup> This special federal unit has always maintained that the American criminal underworld is organized along racial lines and that the entire organization is headed by a group of Sicilians. This transpires quite clearly from the deposition of Carlo Siragusa, a special agent in the narcotic squad, in front of the Kefauver Investigation Committee [sic].<sup>3</sup>

1 Frederic Sondern. *Brotherhood of Evil: The Mafia*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1959. *La mafia oggi*. Milano: Bompiani, 1960.

2 Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Agency of the Department of Treasury established in 1930. In 1968 it merged with other agencies to form the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, the predecessor of the present Drug Enforcement Administration.

3 Estes Kefauver (1903–1963). Politician from Tennessee. He served as senator from 1949 to 1963.

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Siragusa is of Sicilian descent and has sworn war against his country fellowmen who dishonor the island and who, in his opinion, are the minds of history's largest criminal enterprise ever. This organization concentrates its dominance in the United States but extends its tentacles on the international stage, from Turkey and Syria to Italy and France. From the Al Capone<sup>4</sup> era, when criminals were at most operating on a national scale, we have moved to the [Lucky] Luciano era, with an international dimension. The world has shrunk in size not only for good but also for evil. Airplanes that carry medicines that save people in far away lands are also used for the drug trade that poisons the young. Progress is progress also for crime.

The stories narrated in this very interesting book come from the archives of the FBI, from the Narcotic Department, the IRS, the Secret Service and the Postal Police. All these organizations operate with secret agents that are independent of local state governments and are therefore considered immune from political pressure, particularly from elected state attorney generals. They are the most respected and most feared law enforcement agencies, with great resources, and shielded even from pressures from Congress. This book isn't particularly sensationalistic, but exactly for this reason it has caused enormous sensation. The raw material is pretty well known already but the fact that it is confirmed through the depositions of federal authorities makes it that more striking. Even the Kefauver investigation almost disappears when compared with the details of these stories. The most important aspect of this documentation is that it refutes the Kefauver investigation's thesis about Mafia as the center of organized crime in the United States. This theory was based on the hypothesis that Mafia, at least from a law enforcement perspective, was structured like a regular corporation, with a chairman and regular meetings. The report, to the contrary, concedes that nothing of that sort exists. What really

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• *Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce*. Created in 1950 at the urging of Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver. The hearings were broadcast live on television and even shown in movie theaters, in front of an estimated audience of 30 million viewers. They had a huge influence in shaping the attitude of American public opinion toward Italian Americans.

4 Alphonse "Al" Capone (1899-1947). Arguably the most notorious American Mafia boss.



exists, according to the writer, is an association of Sicilian families that exploits the environment by means of the systematic violation of the law. Their common characteristics are cohesion, discipline, intelligence and a basic philosophy. (I am using the word *philosophy* in the American sense, meaning a certain concept of life.) These families utilize all the guarantees that American law has put in place to protect the innocent, and use them skillfully to avoid the punishment they deserve. The problem, thus, is not in the actions of certain individuals: it is in the habits, mentality and identity of a group of Sicilians who live in a state of semi-isolation in the United States.

What are the fundamental characteristics of these Mafiosi? The book emphasizes, in particular, the tight cohesion within each family. These are strong, proud and hard-working people. The women are taught to understand, forgive and ignore the lifestyle of their men, be they fathers, brothers or husbands. Even when their dignity and feelings are offended by marital infidelity, they would never turn to the police. They are excellent cooks and devoted mothers.

If the family becomes rich—and it happens quite often—they don't seek social recognition. Their tendency is to stay in a separate world. They only visit with family members and trusted friends. They don't commingle with neighbors, and social relations with the outside world are limited to the minimum necessary. When they are arrested they are always courteous: they smile, bow and immediately ask to see a lawyer. Their fundamental rule of life is a very strong sense of self-control. In general they are not ostentatious with their wealth: they are happy dressing modestly, living in two-storey detached single-family homes furnished in the style of the European middle class of fifty years ago. Only when it comes to cars they choose luxury brands, like every other solid American businessman. They are usually good family men, they don't get drunk and they attend mass at the local parish church to which they give generously. They are always willing to do favors for people in power and then they return inside their protective shell.

The bosses command respect even when they end up behind bars. This phenomenon has been observed also in Italian prisons: lower-rank Mafiosi take care of their bosses as if they were domestic servants. Predominance is not acquired by means of a popularity

contest. It is earned. The implicit hierarchy among Mafia members is not communicated by secret handshakes or special signals. Rather, it's a matter of intuition and instinct and it reflects control over a network of common acquaintances. The most appreciated quality is secrecy, particularly with law enforcement. The infraction to the rule of silence is punished with the harshest retaliation. There is also a very strong sense of brotherhood among members so that when a member is put away in prison his family is adequately provided for in all its needs. Though they were once migrants now they don't like to travel much. They don't stray far from a thin strip on the Mediterranean Sea in Sicily or their new residences in the United States. Their business model is based on extracting a profit from transactions centered on illegal goods and services. The golden age of Mafia was the era of Prohibition when a large portion of the population was implicitly supporting its activities. With alcohol trafficking also came gambling and prostitution. Law enforcement forces have also investigated Mafia's infiltration into legitimate activities, such as the trade unions; distribution networks of alcoholic beverages [after Prohibition]; import of Italian products, in particular cheese, oil and canned tomatoes; control of wholesale fish and fresh produce markets; bakeries; distribution and servicing of jukeboxes; management of restaurants, pizzerias, coffee shops and night clubs. In many cases these activities operate legally and are headed by professional managers<sup>5</sup> in other cases they serve as covers for much more lucrative illegal trafficking. The most important decisions, such as eliminating traitors or dividing up the territory among competitors, are administered by a council in the course of secret meetings. Only one of these meetings has ever been discovered, in the town of Apalachin in the mountains of northern New York State. The discovery was in part the result of the determination and curiosity of a local police officer who wanted to find out the source of wealth of an Italian resident, Joseph "Joe the Barber" Barbara,<sup>5</sup> who was living in a villa with a lavish lifestyle and no visible means of support. About seventy Mafiosi were interrogated by federal authorities who, in the end, could not find a

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5 Joseph "Joe the Barber" Barbara (1905-1959). Head of the Bufalino Mafia family of Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, PA. He hosted a meeting of bosses in his residence of Apalachin, in Upstate New York in 1957.

single compromising piece of evidence. All the suspects declined to answer questions, pleading the protection of the Fifth Amendment which guarantees the right against self-incrimination. Many of them came forth with the same identical excuse: they stopped by Mr. Barbara's villa on a courtesy call and spent time with him enjoying the landscape and playing cards.

According to the book, the favorite setup for the quick and unexpected execution of traitors is often during a banquet with other members of the brotherhood: surrounded by Italian wine and large portions of pasta, the victim is *taken care of* discretely, and the body later dumped in a remote location. In reality, though, the modes of execution have been quite varied depending on the circumstances. Albert Anastasia<sup>6</sup> was gunned down while sitting in a barber chair in a fancy hotel. Al Capone lined up his enemies against a wall in a car garage.<sup>7</sup> The victims thought they were being frisked and robbed by police agents; instead they ended up shot in the back by a machine gun fusillade. Some of these scenes appear in the movie *Some Like It Hot*, with Marilyn Monroe<sup>8</sup> (with the exception of the Italian gangsters' scenes, it is one of the most idiotic products ever to come out of Hollywood.) The initial scene of the film refers to the Chicago massacre I just mentioned. Another movie I am familiar with is based on a banquet of Italian mobsters in Florida. In the course of the meeting of a fictional Italian opera house society five traitors are executed. The first scene is extremely realistic while the second is definitely humorous with the chairman giving a speech in pidgin English. Meanwhile, at this time, a new film is being shot on the life of Al Capone, who already was the subject of previous films such as *Little Caesar* (1931) with Edward G.

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<sup>6</sup> Albert Anastasia, born Umberto Anastasio (1902-1957). In the 1950s he was the head of the Gambino family and one of the most powerful Mafia bosses of his time.

<sup>7</sup> The reference is to the Saint Valentine's Day massacre in 1929, ordered by Al Capone against members of the Irish Mafia.

<sup>8</sup> *Some Like It Hot*. Dir. Billy Wilder. United Artists, 1959.

• Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962). Born Norma Jeane Mortenson. World-famous actor, singer and performer.

Robinson<sup>9</sup> and *Scarface* (1932), starring Paul Muni.<sup>10</sup> I am mentioning these movies to illustrate how vivid the Mafia phenomenon still appears to be in the American collective imagination.

Sicilians in general are very upset with the Sondern book despite the fact that the writer acknowledges with great clarity that the overwhelming majority of Sicilians are honest people who have contributed mightily to building this country. But he also confronts the nagging problem I mentioned at the beginning: “How come these good and brave people did not show any kind of initiative against the black sheep in their midst, unlike the Anglo-Saxon communities? Why didn’t they protest and resist, even resorting to violence, against a few bandits that were exploiting them?” The writer quotes the answer of a prestigious—albeit unnamed—member of the community who explains that silence is caused by fear. To me, it is an excuse even worse than the sin itself.

Should some of my readers be offended, I shall also report that the Sondern books talk at length in an admiring tone about the intelligence and the abilities of the top Italian crime figures in the United States. Al Capone invented the concept of criminal operations on a national base. “This short, ugly man, with a powerful body and enormous energy, had incredible managerial creativity. If he was operating in a normal environment he would have become the leader of a large American corporation (...). His organization was a model of efficiency.” Al Capone, incidentally, was not Sicilian,<sup>11</sup> unlike Lucky Luciano who is from Lercara Friddi in the province of Palermo. Also Sicilian was Luciano’s mentor *don* Giuseppe Masseria,<sup>12</sup> “a first-class businessman,

9 *Little Caesar*. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. Warner Brothers, 1931.

• Edward G. Robinson (1893-1973). Born Emanuel Goldenberg, film and stage actor.

10 *Scarface*. Dir. Howard Hawks. Universal, 1932.

• Paul Muni (1895-1967). Born Frederick Meshilem Meier Weisenfreund, film and stage actor.

11 Al Capone’s parents emigrated from the province of Salerno to New York City, where he was born.

12 Giuseppe “Joe the Boss” Masseria (1886-1931). He was one of the first Mafia bosses and head of the Genovese family. The honorific title *don* is used primarily in southern Italy. It derives from the Latin *dominus* (lord, house master). It is also used

with leadership skills.” Sicily was also the land of origin of Giuseppe Lanza,<sup>13</sup> “an organizer with immense energy who dominated the fish market.” The psychological portraits of Sicilian crime figures in the United States correspond to a large degree to what we also observe in Italy. However, the thesis presented in the book, according to which the roots of the criminal mind are in the family history, doesn’t hold water. There is no proof that these criminals came from dynasties of felons. One should always bear in mind that the United States has been host to several organized crime syndicates that have no connections with Sicilians. For instance Meyer Lansky, Wady David, Louis Buchalter, Abner Zwillman and Abe Reles<sup>14</sup> were all members of gangs that either cooperated or were in direct competition with the Sicilian Mafia. And finally, how can anyone talk about Mafia as if it were a single entity while the author himself, in every page of this book, shows that among the Sicilians there were constant fights, turf battles and personal rivalries? Masseria was killed to clear the way for a younger competitor. Frank Costello was the target of an assassination attempt caused probably by disagreements on splitting booty. Albert Anastasia was killed after trying to take over a territory controlled by Cubans. Any honest historian will recognize that there have been several Mafias, some of which composed largely of Sicilians. However, there has never been *one* Mafia that controls and dominates all others.

In the end the writer unfortunately reveals poor knowledge of things Italian. Italian words are often misspelled; glaring errors of geography and history keep appearing; as, for instance, the peculiar assertion that “in 1925 Mussolini decided that Sicily would become the political and intellectual center of the Fascist empire in the Mediterranean.” So many absurdities in so few words! All in all, though, one should

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for Catholic priests as the equivalent of the English *Father*.

13 Giuseppe Lanza (1904-1968). Union organizer at the Fulton Street Fish market and prominent member of the Genovese crime family;

14 Meyer Lansky (1902-1983). Mobster and close ally of Lucky Luciano.

- Wady David (1914-1965). Gangster from Boston’s South End.
- Louis Buchalter (1897-1944).

- Abner Zwillman (1904-1959).

- Abe Reles (1906-1941).

not judge the book based on these or other blunders. The relevant aspect is the research based on documents from the archives of various federal agencies. For instance, the book reports an anecdote about the gangster Eugenio Giannini<sup>15</sup> (not a Sicilian name, by the way). Siragusa met with him in Milan in a hotel near Piazza del Duomo<sup>16</sup> while he was in the company of an alleged courtesan. Giannini had arranged the meeting to sell information to the American agent during a visit to Italy whose purpose was to organize the purchase and shipment of cocaine to the United States. Very interesting indeed.

*April 5, 1959*

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<sup>15</sup> Eugenio Giannini (1906-1952). Soldier in the Lucchese crime family turned FBI informant.

<sup>16</sup> Piazza del Duomo is Milan's main square.

## HOW THE MAFIA MET THE NEEDS OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Setting aside moral considerations, my definition of the criminal association that the American press calls Mafia would be the following: the convergence of Italian vitality (audacity and creativity) with the needs and the means of a rich country such as America.

A few days ago at dinner with a small group of acquaintances we started discussing this very hot topic: in addition to yours truly, the others were a journalist from Italy, an Italian diplomat, an importer of Italian foods and two ladies whose contribution to the conversation was exclusively their grace and beauty. It is rather interesting how the arrest of Italian gangsters during a business meeting in the town of Apalachin, in Upstate New York, generated an unprecedented flurry of comments and reactions in the Italian community. Some Italian Americans have even gone as far as writing letters to newspapers complaining about alleged insinuations made against their community by some of the commentaries. Until now it seemed to me that Italian Americans barely noticed and barely worried about what was being said and written about them. The books that have been published on the topic of organized crime did not become best sellers in the Italian American communities; and even books that celebrate Italian American success stories, some of which contain historical exaggerations, have been barely noticed. Occasionally, from time to time there are complaints when a movie comes out portraying gangsters with Italian names. However, I have never read an analysis or a refutation of the criminal activities that have been regularly reported in newspapers and books, including those that are mentioned in the Kefauver congressional inquiry. And no denunciations either. My observation is that Italian Americans have been defensive; always sensitive to the offense of an Italian name used in a movie, but never eager to understand and fight this internal problem. The outcome is that the American public opinion by now is convinced that there is a connection between some specific forms of criminality and the Italian origin of many citizens. No one, so far as I know, has given a convincing rebuttal to this opinion.

In the course of the evening I noticed that we were served the inevitable dish of pasta and a few bottles of wine from an august Italian winery—long defunct—whose name is still being used in the United States. This is not uncommon: many relics of the European past are still present here, like specimens in the glass cases of a museum. During the course of our animated conversation (not so *Italian* though that we would keep interrupting each other) I was able to form an opinion on several points that I am going to expose to the Italian public.

First of all, Mafia, be it in New York or in the United States, does not exist in the form of a true association. The Kefauver investigation uses the name in generic terms to indicate groups of criminals from the same hometowns and on the margin of American society. No proof has been presented that it is an all-encompassing federation of gangsters. In contrast to this, we all agreed that there is such a thing as a *Mafioso mentality* that is observable in the protagonists of several recent famous criminal cases. The same mentality is also widely present in a large part of the Italian communities in the United States. With this I don't mean that the Italian communities are composed of gangsters. Rather, I claim that they have tolerated the existence of these gangsters whose activities are well known to the Italian-language press published in this country and to Italian American politicians who have never done anything to denounce the bosses and their methods while they were expanding their reach into the communities with banquets, formal dances and parades. Someone also mentioned that organized crime supports politicians and their electoral campaigns, rallies and charities. One of us made a useful distinction between two kinds of gangsters: those imported from Italy and those who grow up locally. In the Apalachin dragnet, the Mafiosi were all between forty and sixty-five years old. Their specialties were the protection racket of small grocery stores; ballot stuffing in elections; and, more recently, trade-union activities of extortion against entrepreneurs. One of the emblematic representatives of this cohort was a certain Giuseppe Profaci,<sup>1</sup> a distributor of counterfeit olive oil. The natives, meanwhile, have a different mind set and, so to speak, a different education and vision. Their model is Frank Costello, who has a wide

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1 Giuseppe Profaci (1897-1962), Founder of the Colombo crime family.



range of interests that reach into California and New Orleans. He still uses the old provincial gangsters as soldiers, but he has a very sharp financial mind and good political connections on a national scale. This kind of Mafioso has greater familiarity with the American culture and lifestyle, knows how to push the right buttons and is de-facto perfectly assimilated into the forces of American capitalism.

It is also important to mention another set of factors that the defenders of Italian Americans often point to, namely the responsibility that capitalist, protestant, Anglo-Saxon America has had in the development of this particular kind of Italian entrepreneurial spirit. It is not enough to say that before the arrival of the large mass of Italian immigrants America already had several criminal organizations composed of Anglo-Saxons, Irish and Jews; and that these were very active with extortions, murders, robberies and other crimes. In fact, the responsibility of America is even deeper. We should not forget that when Italian immigrants were brought here to replace the recently-emancipated slaves, they were kept on the outside of mainstream American society; with no educational opportunities, no support and not even charity. They were left to fend for themselves without protection in the hands of a very corrupt Italian leadership made of bankers that stole their money; demagogues; extortionists and exploiters. This class of people dominated the communities for decade and controlled an unreliable, corrupt Italian-language press. All these aspects are mentioned in the reports made by visitors from Italy between 1880 and 1900. The self-appointed community leaders took advantage of the immigrants' ignorance and prepared the terrain for the low-level criminals who later evolved into today's high-flying Mafiosi. An additional observation concerns the split between American legislation and its prohibitions against alcohol, gambling and prostitution on one side; and, on the other side, an enormous market willing to pay for these very vices. Without these prohibitions Italian criminal activities would not have been possible. Leaving aside for a moment the hypocritical posturing of laws that are systematically violated, we must recognize that entrepreneurial and often ingenious Italian criminals had a very important function in American society. There was a vacuum to be filled and they filled it. Thus, I wasn't surprised when one of us said that he was prouder to be from the same town of Frank Costello than

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from that of a cobbler who made a pair of ornate slippers and sent them to President Eisenhower as a gift.

One of our dinner companions recalled that when Italians first arrived the only education they received was the violence they suffered at the hand of the Irish under the indifferent glance of policemen who also were Irish. How can one blame the poor Italian who pulled a knife to defend himself? These people actually saw the Mafia as a badly needed protector. Today the treatment of the new immigrants who are coming to America is very different, as can be seen in the case of Puerto Ricans who, when they arrive, find schools, social workers and religious institutions eager to help them settle in the new environment and get an education. The press is full of stories that focus on the positive aspects of their presence, contrary of what happened in the decades after 1880 when newspapers were full of insults against Italians. Yet, even with social support, these communities lack a leadership class that can provide role models and guidance and they are beginning to show the initial signs of the formation of criminal organizations commonly found among immigrants uprooted from their native countries for economical reasons. Today it is Puerto Ricans who pull out their knives. The ascent of Puerto Ricans in trades and professions, preceded by thirty years of American presence in the island, is being helped in many ways. They have two newspapers where they can debate their issues and at least fifty movie theaters. On Broadway one of the greatest hits in recent history was *West Side Story*,<sup>2</sup> the moving tale of a young Puerto Rican woman who in the end marries an American man. Seventy years ago Broadway would have never produced similar stories about poor Italians.

Today's America is different. The America of the past had the immigrants she deserved. As I said before, the large majority of Italian Americans is composed of honest, tenacious, patient people. Some of them are ingenious businessmen and entrepreneurs. Their only fault is that they never joined the American press in denouncing and fighting the gangsters in their midst, the very people who exploited the Italian community for decades and that still today, even in their old age, still manage to give it a generally negative reputation.

2 *West Side Story*. Music by Leonard Bernstein; lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, 1957.

## ITALIAN AMERICAN GANGSTERS ARE AGING AND GRAYING

For a long time the federal government, the police, magistrates, prosecutors and journalists tried to remove from the streets of New York Albert Anastasia<sup>1</sup> by many considered a murderer and one of the big bosses of the local Mafia. What they failed to do—legally—for years, someone from his same line of business managed to accomplish in a couple of minutes—someone who presumably wanted to take his position or sought vengeance for something Anastasia had done in his position.

The morning of October 25, 1957, at 10:30 a.m., Umberto (also known as Alberto) Anastasia was relaxing in the reclining chair of his favorite barber shop in the Park Sheraton Hotel. It was the same hotel where Arnold Rothstein,<sup>1</sup> also a mafia boss, had been killed twenty years earlier. Before lying back, Anastasia chatted and joked with the owner, Arturo Grosso. Suddenly, two men entered the establishment wearing black gloves and with faces partially covered by bandanas. They pulled revolvers from their pockets; pistol-whipped the owner and started firing at Anastasia who, from his position, had not seen them entering. For some strange coincidence, Antonio Coppola, a fishmonger considered to be Anastasia's bodyguard, was not with him. Each killer shot five bullets two of which lethal: one to the back and one to the head. Two more bullets went through the right hand that the victim had raised to protect himself. Wrapped in a bathrobe with tissue paper around his neck, Anastasia spun around and fell between two barber chairs. Death was instantaneous. The lights overhead shone on a large diamond ring on his left hand. In the shop, besides the owner, were two other clients, a manicure lady, two barbers and a shoeshine. Screaming in horror and fear, they ran out of the shop bumping into the killers as they were fleeing, thus making it impossible for witnesses to discern who was who and identify the shooters. The descriptions given to the police turned out to be so vague that an

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Rothstein (1882-1928), Notorious gambler and racketeer, he was reputed to have conspired to fix the 1919 baseball World Series lost by the White Sox.

officer on the scene commented that he had never seen such a large assembly of blind people in his lifetime. Thusly ended the life of an individual who had carved a niche and found a role for himself in New York's society; owner of a hundred thousand dollar Spanish-style villa where he lived with his brother Tony (nicknamed "Tough Tony") surrounded by a 10-foot high metal fence topped with barbed wire and with a great view of the Hudson River. The grounds were guarded by three great Danes and, at night, illuminated by search lights. His was an exemplary family—so to speak—at least so far as the history of Italian crime families in America goes. One of the seven Anastasia brothers actually turned out right and became a priest and revered pastor in the Bronx.

At some point in the past I did some research and reconstructed part of their life history. The seven brothers were born in Calabria to a railroad worker that operated a railroad crossing in the countryside. One can imagine what kind of life they lived: the noise of the sea on one side; the monotonous passing of trains; school and church far away in town. One can also understand why those seven brothers who decided they would make it to America at all cost were exceptional people. For sure they did not bring with them from Italy a criminal organization or criminal experience. Some of them could not obtain passports, so they entered the country illegally. In New York they started working in the worst and most corrupt environment, the same piers that the movie *On the Waterfront* has popularized all over the globe, exposing the tragic violence that dominates that world. Step by step they climbed the ladder and became the toughest, most tyrannical, most violent and thuggish mobsters of the whole place. Their leadership style was legendary: in the world of trade unions, the brothers Antonio, Alberto and Gerardo were respected but, most of all, feared. Their lives were a sequence of arrests, trials, and acquittals (thank to the deaths of potential witnesses) that can only be explained with the liberal procedures of American justice that gives the accused the presumption of innocence and easily releases them on bail. Antonio, who, on one occasion, was facing charges that could lead to a death sentence, was able to get away unscathed because four witnesses that

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were scheduled to testify against him disappeared before the trial began. In one occasion, Antonio was accused of beating a longshoreman who refused to obey his orders. His version was that the poor man had fallen down and that he had simply dusted off his coat. The judge accepted his explanation.

As a way to explain the conditions in which they operated, we must consider that this empire-building and leadership style were similar in brutality to the regime of slavery in the American south. The only mitigating factor appears to be the fact that, ostensibly, the longshoremen themselves, or at least a majority of them, accepted it. After long political fights; investigations and, most of all, the work of a Jesuit father<sup>3</sup> who fought long and hard for the rehabilitation of longshoremen; finally the union agreed to regular elections supervised by observers from other independent labor organizations. It was quite a surprise for all, Jesuit father included, when the results showed that the majority of the workers opted to continue with the same leadership and the slavery-like system.

In the neighborhood where they lived, Anastasia and his family enjoyed a good reputation and even the police officers who kept an eye on their house declared to the press that they were model citizens and were even involved in public charities. In fact, I remember that in one occasion the longshoremen's marching band, led by Tony Anastasia [sic],<sup>4</sup> opened the procession of the *Madonna del Carmelo*<sup>5</sup> with great satisfaction of the local priest and his flock.

As Albert Anastasia was having his last shave, miles away his wife was leaving the villa to run some errands. A reporter who went to the villa managed to approach a groundskeeper who was working in the garden. The dialogue he reported is worthy of the best Hemingway.

"Is Mrs. Anastasia in?"

<sup>3</sup> Most likely the reference is to John M. Corridan (1911-1984), a Jesuit known as the "Waterfront Priest." He was the inspiration for the character of Father Barry in the film *On the Waterfront*.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Anastasio (1906-1963). He kept the original spelling of the last name *Anastasio*, unlike his brother Albert who changed his to *Anastasia*.

<sup>5</sup> Most likely the reference is to the annual procession of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and San Paolino di Nola in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

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“Why?”

“*Campa*,” Anastasia was gunned down.”

“Which one?”

“Albert.”

“Father or son?”

“I believe it must be the father.”

The reporter tells that the gardener remained impassible and said he could not let him in because the lady of the house was out shopping. Then he turned around and kept to his work without a word.

The police believe that this is the sequel to the attempted murder of Frank Costello, the mob’s minister of finance. Nobody will ever find out who gave the killers their orders or who pulled the trigger. For sure these killers were more brazen and better shots than the one who tried to get rid of Costello. The murder took place in a central location in New York and the assassins, following a protocol that could have come directly from Edgar Allan Poe,<sup>7</sup> disappeared in the crowd that, in that location, is always massive as it enters and exits the dark tunnels of the subway. The weapons were later found in a garbage can: foreign made, imported to the United States several years earlier and sold in other cities. Out of sheer curiosity, here are the names of the first people interrogated by the police: Mike Miranti, sixty years old, an old friend of Anastasia; Antonio Coppola, forty-nine years old, one of Anastasia’s body guards; Ercole Anniello, a big shot of organized crime from Brooklyn, plus some other minor characters. All of them were Italian. Despite intense detective work, the police could not find the murderers, nor did they discover a motive for the killing. It certainly wasn’t the first time that the efforts of the police could not break through the power of the mob. This organization is based on fear: witnesses and people with information do not want to talk. Anastasia in particular was known to go after witnesses to get rid of them. Despite all the secrecy, however, a couple of days ago an

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<sup>6</sup> *Campa* is the dialect version of *compagnia* [companionship, comradeship], derived from Late Latin *companionem*. In southern Italy it is used with selected friends and acquaintances to indicate a status of social equality and confidentiality but also respect [buddy, pal].

<sup>7</sup> Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). Writer, editor and literary critic.

extraordinary fact happened. The police learned that a special meeting of big mafia bosses was going to take place in a plush villa out of the way and far from busy roads.<sup>8</sup> The villa is owned by Joseph Barbara, fifty-one years old, owner of a local tavern and believed to be one of the crime bosses of Upstate New York. The police operation worked to perfection. Fifty-seven notorious crime figures were stopped and questioned. None of them was carrying guns; none of them was out on parole and everybody told the same story: they were visiting their dear friend, Barbara, who had fallen ill. All the last names of the fifty-seven were Italian, with the exception of a couple of Hispanic. It was interesting to see that the age of these individuals was between forty and sixty-five, with an average of over fifty. There were no young people. All of them are people who have made it and, like all the other senior people involved in organized crime, in the last few years have adopted the strategy of having a legitimate business as a cover; anything from liquor stores to car garages to moving companies. The purpose is to hide the real activity that is responsible for their comfortable lifestyle: luxury cars, expensive night clubs, top notch restaurants, villas and second and third homes at the beach and in the mountains. At their age they feel the need for a peaceful existence. After all, they all are good family fathers, they send their children to private schools and colleges, and they help them set up legitimate businesses or pursue respectable careers. The nephew of one of them is a criminal lawyer in New York.

The police could not find out what the purpose of the meeting was. Some believe that the attempted murder of Frank Costello and the assassination of Albert Anastasia indicate some kind of revolt by the young gangsters against the old guard. Others believe the meeting was called to agree on a strategic plan and avoid the consequences of an investigation into the garbage hauling industry in New York. Practically every company in this business is owned by Italians and their connections to organized crime are well known. Let's just say there is something that doesn't smell right, here. [The original footnote reads: "The Court of Appeal with a verdict on Nov. 28, 1960, stated

8 The reference is to the meeting that took place in the town of Apalachin, N.Y. in 1957, and discussed in previous chapters.

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that the charges of conspiracy were not proven and all the people indicted were acquitted. They all maintained that the only reason for the gathering was to visit their ailing friend.”]

Among the people who were interrogated we find the peculiar figure of Caspar [sic] Donald Modica,<sup>9</sup> who bragged about “having been in contact with some of the most illustrious figures in the country.” He looks much more dignified than the rest of the garbage collectors; with white hair contrasting with the dark southern complexion of his skin; big turtle-framed glasses; a thin mustache; a cigarette hanging from his lips and fluent and smooth English. He looks like what he is, a professor at New York University (a private institution), where he teaches philosophy of education and safety regulation in manufacturing. He is proud of his expertise in industrial psychology and in the relations between management and labor. He is thus qualified to practice public relations, a novelty management discipline invented in America that recently has become all the rage in Italy. Unfortunately, in addition to a résumé as a professor, he also has a rap sheet with two convictions, one for practicing medicine without a license and one for attempted robbery. The crime world holds him in high esteem, as signaled by the fact that his wife is the goddaughter of Albert Anastasia’s wife. Modica was also the private tutor of the children of Albert Anastasia, of Joe Adonis and Willie Moretti,<sup>10</sup> three high ranking figures in organized crime. His lawyer claims that Modica has been rehabilitated. In 1952 he became director of the educational programs sponsored by a social club founded by Anastasia whose members are primarily longshoremen. Meanwhile, all fifty-seven participants caught at Barbara’s house

<sup>9</sup> Casper Modica (1904-?). He was an instructor at New York University where he taught an extension course on philosophy of education from 1939 to 1943. In 1957 he was interrogated by a senate committee investigating the garbage hauling industry in New York. In the issue of November 15, 1957, the *New York Times* published the profile “Mob Psychologist: Casper Donald Modica,” with no by-line, in which he was reported stating: “I taught the children of some of the most illustrious men in the United States” (meaning the children of mobsters). “One of them is practicing [sic] law, criminal law,” he added.

<sup>10</sup> Joe Adonis (1902-1971). Born Giuseppe Antonio Doro. High profile mobster.  
 • Willie Moretti (1894-1951). He was an underboss in the Genovese family and a cousin of Frank Costello.

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are now out free because the authorities could find nothing against them. Whatever they were discussing in that meeting remains a mystery. Moreover, if a few days from now the police should find the dead body of some Mafia veteran, killed with no witnesses, even if the assassination took place in broad daylight in a crowded place, it will still be a mystery.

It is important, however, to observe that Italian American youngsters give minimal contribution to organized crime. All the elderly are settled down, they live off their assets and are accepted in their communities under the guise of real estate agents, salesmen, soft drink distributors and other similar activities. Organized crime is already all grey-haired.

*New York, December 8, 1957.*

## CRIMINALS WITH ITALIAN NAMES AND AMERICAN UPBRINGING

Correspondents of Italian newspapers in the United States have been reporting that several Italian American organizations are protesting a television show about organized crime that mixes together famous known criminals—beginning with Al Capone—and many fictional characters, all with Italian last names. The show, *The Untouchables*,<sup>1</sup> will not return next year and the Italian organizations took it as a sign that their complaints were successful in forcing its cancellation. The producers, on the other hand, insist that the reasons are purely business related. But it is still significant that a promise had previously been made that the characters would no longer have Italian names.

In the past, Italian immigrants in the United States were represented in cartoons as little men with olive complexion, short and squat; with a mustache, grinding an organ while a monkey extracted fortune-telling colored cards from a hat and handed them out to passer-bys in exchange for a few pennies in the beggar's tin cup. When I first arrived in New York I still remember seeing maybe four or five of them, with the kindpathetic *frinfin* that showed up in the poetry of the young Aldo Palazzeschi and Sergio Corazzini.<sup>2</sup> By now they are all gone. After being elected mayor, Fiorello La Guardia stopped issuing new licenses; and, despite the fact that their presence was a picturesque and even moving feature of this city, I must agree that it was the right decision. In any case, it is improbable that any young second-generation Italian American would have continued the tradition and the nomadic existence of a beggar—their peculiar charm notwithstanding. By the time new licenses stopped being issued, factories, businesses and other job opportunities in the private and public sectors were offering far

1 *The Untouchables*. Prod. Quinn Martin. ABC, New York, 1959-1963. Based on the memoirs of Eliot Ness about a team of law enforcement agents who led the charge against Al Capone in Chicago in the 1930s.

2 Aldo Palazzeschi (1885-1974). Pen name of Aldo Giurlani; avant-garde novelist, poet and essayist.

• Sergio Corazzini (1886-1907). Poet. The reference to these poets is an inside joke and a jab at two of the most important avant-garde Italian poets of their time. Needless to say, Prezolini did not appreciate their style.

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superior and more respectable living wages and social status.

My personal opinion about the effects of the complaints by Italian American associations against that television show is that they will have no influence whatsoever on the attitude of American public opinion. In the United States today nobody harbors prejudices against citizens of Italian descent based on the reason that there have been numerous crime figures of Italian origin. I never felt around me the suspicion that I was carrying a knife in my pocket; or that at night I was hanging out with people who were planning a break-in into a store; or a hit to get rid of a traitor. Other Italians feel the same way. I asked people who moved from humble origins to relevant social positions: in school well-behaved Italian American boys and girls aren't singled out for harassment nor are they targeted or taunted for alleged connections to the mob. On the other hand, the American public believes that the major criminal organizations are in the hands of people of Italian descent and, more specifically, of Sicilians. This opinion derives from the fact that Italian names often appear in news stories on organized crime and also because of fiction-like episodes such as the meeting of crime figures in the small town of Apalachin, where all the participants had Italian last names.

All symbolic representations of a people and the general opinions expressed about them from the outside are always inadequate, often negative and sometimes even openly libelous. Simplification and generalization neglect many positive aspects. The little organ grinder could not possibly symbolize an entire population that had proved time and again to be composed by a large majority of very hard-working people. However, these stereotypical representations also contain elements of truth. Both the organ grinders and the Mafiosi did exist. Indeed, Mafiosi still exist today. But I believe the habit of connecting an Italian name to organized-crime activities will probably disappear from city streets the same way Italian organ grinders did.

The legends surrounding Mafia aren't born in a vacuum. I confess and maintain that I am much happier to associate myself with the *race* of Al Capone than with that of the organ grinders. I also prefer the characters in the *Inferno* to those in the *Limbo*.<sup>3</sup> It is nevertheless

3 *Inferno* is the first cantica of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

perfectly understandable why the Italian population, which has so successfully become integrated into American life, is disturbed to find itself described in such negative terms in a popular show. There is also no doubt that the official doctrine (but not the outright practice) of the media and the American government is that discrimination against citizens based on race or religion should not exist. Lastly, Italians have witnessed other racial minorities rebel against offensive representations and obtain reparation (although they seem to me to be rather inconsequential victories). Therefore, if Italian Americans have protested in the typical American way, using the media and with demonstrations in front of the television stations that broadcast *The Unouchables*; and, finally, if they have boycotted products from American companies that sponsored the show with advertisements; well, more power to them. They did the right thing. Moreover, if the cancellation was truly caused by their protest, that would mean that they have political muscle too. In every country in the world this counts a lot, but in America it counts even more.

In the end, however, I don't agree with the protest strategy of Italian Americans. I believe they should have let sleeping dogs lie. If the names of our fellow-countrymen disappeared from television, they would pop up on radio. And if they were removed from radio, they would show up in newspapers and in depositions during trials. Finally, it seems to me that Italian Americans, who are so worried about the good name of Italians, behave like those who hide the thermometer that shows a fever: the fever doesn't go away. I also fear the counter-reactions caused by these demonstrations: the protest movement should not be headed by certain individuals whose reputation raises even larger doubts.<sup>4</sup> I was comforted that my opinion is indeed correct

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• In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the circle called *Limbo* comes before the *Inferno* proper. It is populated by illustrious men and noble spirits who died before Christianity and, therefore, did not receive a baptism. They live in a state of anger, yearning for the vision of god. In contemporary language, it means a dimension of upsetting uncertainty, lack of clarity and psychological anxiety.

<sup>4</sup> This thinly veiled reference alludes to one of the leaders of the demonstrations, reported to be Anthony Anastasio, brother of Albert Anastasia, the recognized boss of the union that dominated New York's docks.

when I read a column by John Crosby in the *Herald Tribune*.<sup>5</sup> Crosby is a very accomplished journalist, with a great reputation for integrity, independence and straightforwardness. Here is what he wrote:

This campaign is hard to take for a writer. A writer, crazy as he may be, uses his ears and eyes to observe society and to report how society is faring and how life is. He writes what he sees and hears. For instance, a writer who read about the dragnet of dubious characters in Apalachin certainly would have noticed that every single last name was Italian and could have concluded that there is a quite a number of Italians in criminal organizations. And in fact it would be rather difficult for any writer to write the history of criminal organizations in this country without going back to Al Capone—and even farther in the past—without filling the story almost exclusively with Italian names. At the risk of drawing the ire of the Italian American Anti-Defamation League I must point to the fact that Italians and particularly Sicilians have a genius for thuggerly and criminal organizations in a percentage larger than other national groups. True, Arturo Toscanini is also one of them! Italians are a pleasant people, with a warm heart and they know how to sing. But they have also produced a bunch of criminals.

The article is much longer. It is strong and funny. I can't reproduce more here, lest I get accused by Crosby of being an Italian literary criminal who plagiarizes from an American colleague to look good. Now, Crosby's pieces are read by people more numerous and more important than those who read the flighty and irrelevant Italian American press. It seems to me that demonstrations in front of movie theaters and television studios have only had the effect of reinforcing the general opinion still existing in America on organized crime; on Italian Mafia and, in particular, Sicilian Mafia. There is a second order of considerations: these demonstrations in defense of the good name of Italians were organized by a newspaper<sup>6</sup> whose owners and editors pleaded guilty of what they called a "technical violation," but that the

<sup>5</sup> John Crosby (1912-1991). Media critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*.

• *New York Herald Tribune*. Founded in 1924. It was *New York Times*'s closest competitor. It closed in 1966.

<sup>6</sup> A not-so-cryptic reference to the *Progresso Italo-Americano*.

law actually calls *fraud*. The frauds (plural), perpetrated against the company's stockholders and the municipality of New York, totaled one million dollars. Nobody in the Italian American community wants to mention these facts. Of course the less this is discussed the better, but, in exchange, that newspaper should stay out of endorsing this campaign for the "good name of Italians." There are many of us of Italian origin who live happily in America without the need for a newspaper to defend our good name.

The Italian-language newspaper that instigated the demonstrations found itself on the same side of the boss<sup>7</sup> of a union organization active in the infamous New York harbor. His name is very well known because his brother was killed in a barber shop downtown New York; and everybody presumes the reason of the killing was related to internal affairs of organized crime. Now, isn't it a bit preposterous to ask for support from the American public opinion with champions like this?

If the organizers of the protest had been model citizens, one could respond to Crosby that, although what he said is accurate, he did not mention many of the circumstances and responsibilities at the root of Italian and Sicilian criminality: First of all, these criminals with Italian names were not educated in Italy but in the United States; second, the nature of their organization is typically American and not Italian; and, finally, this is not a provincial enterprise: it is industrial. Before Al Capone and other Italian Americans like him, there were dozens of criminal gangs in America whose bosses had Anglo-Saxon names or names of other ethnic groups. Moreover, the American public could have chosen not to support criminals by avoiding buying alcohol during Prohibition; or by not using prostitutes after the bordellos were closed by law; or by not gambling illegally. Without the support of Americans, Italian criminals would not have survived. American society needed them: that's all. These people risked their lives or years in prison and operated with great skill in order to give the public the services and goods society had hypocritically prohibited.

One last thing remains to be said. When these Italians, or their parents, came to the United States, they were not treated with white gloves, as now happens to Puerto Ricans, for example. They were

7 Anthony Anastasio.

welcomed in America with the hugs of bosses that wanted to suffocate them. They got help by bankers who robbed them. They received no protection from laws they didn't know existed and didn't understand. The strongest ones among them understood that they had to take matters into their own hands. It's remarkable that only such a small number became criminals.

This is what one should reply to Crosby, if only the dialogue had not been spoiled by those who do not have the stature to engage in it.

*New York, April 9, 1961*

## ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE SMALL FRONTIER TOWN OF TUCSON

The very day I arrived in this growing town I had the impression that the only things worth reporting were the warm sun of winter days and the blackbirds that fly around cypresses. Then, in the hotel lobby I picked up a newspaper with the story of a mysterious crime that had taken place a week earlier and that seemed just perfect to tickle the interest of my readers, probably bored with my observations and commentaries. The newspaper reported the grand jury deposition of the nineteen-year-old Dorothy Janssen, the victim's widow. In her testimony she revealed some curious facts about the crime that was enthalling the city. She said that the night her husband was killed he had taken about three thousand dollars out of a safe full of cash and had armed himself with three handguns. He put one in his belt, one under his armpit and strapped the third to the lower leg. He left without a word and a little later he was found dead. A trail of blood led from his car, where the body was found, to a nearby apartment complex where a certain Victor Colletti lived. Colletti told the grand jury that he didn't know Janssen, that he had never seen him before and that at the time of the crime he was in a different location engaged in a conversation with a University of Arizona professor in one of the modern, safe and respectable residential areas of this growing city. The widow also said she ignored what her husband did for a living. She added that she had never questioned her husband about the source of the money. She would see him open the magic box to take out money when she needed cash for their expenses, and that was it. Maybe another wife would have been a bit concerned knowing that her husband kept so much cash at home, but she was unfazed: "He came home every night," she said. Her parents said the same thing. To them it was enough that "he came back at night." He must have been a really nice boy. But, on that night he went out and did not return. Apparently, he had mentioned a few times that he was receiving money from his family in Belgium. The police discovered that *he* was the one who was sending money abroad to a person with his same last name. From Belgium, so far, nothing has been

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learned. The police also discovered that Victor Colletti was the son of one of the Italian Americans who attended the famous meeting in Apalachin, NY, which, according to the police, was a Mafia summit. But Colletti's alibi was confirmed by the college professor who, by the way, does not have an Italian name. The widow never heard her husband mention Colletti but she remembered the name of another person: Rudy. The name corresponded to that of Rudy Perfetto, or Perfetto, the vice president of a company that owns a chain of Italian restaurants in the city. I visited one of them: it's like a glass box with a horse-shoe counter where, according to the local custom, one sits to eat spaghetti or pizza. When the police started looking for Rudy they found out that he had left town for an unknown destination four hours after the crime had been committed. Also vanished was a certain Morris Brady who had been previously arrested and sentenced twice for illegal gambling. Gone with them, apparently, are the three thousand dollars that nobody has been able to find anywhere. The grand jury in the meantime received the following information: Rudy Perfetto had been scheduled to appear in front of a different judge to face charges of domestic violence against his pregnant wife. After he had been arrested for that crime, Perfetto had been released on a bail set at three thousand dollars. When he didn't show up for his hearing, he forfeited the money and an arrest warrant was issued for him as a "fugitive from justice." Colletti's landlord, a certain Mr. Grande, declared he had never met Janssen and that the day of the crime he too was out of town. Colletti apparently ran away with the help of Frank Fiore, who was never deposed as witness. Unable to solve the mystery with their own resources, the police asked for help from the FBI—which has jurisdiction across state lines—but so far nothing has emerged. To this day nobody knows how Janssen earned a living. Nobody knows why he was killed or who killed him (with a single shot to the stomach after a struggle). It is also not known whether this episode may be related to other crimes in the city or elsewhere in the United States. The silence of the witnesses is as disturbing as the crime itself. There is a smell of *omertà* and the general impression is that some of the witnesses have been threatened.

This probably would be a small story if it happened in a large city;

if the motive didn't appear so mysterious; if it didn't suggest analogies with similar small episodes in other American cities and, finally, if the circumstances weren't so strange. To add to the oddity of the whole situation, we have the unusual marriage of a nineteen-year-old woman with two children who lives comfortably with an abundance of cash whose origin she does not question. This hardly feels like the typical image of the American family to me, although it is *an* image. But the aspect that really attracted my attention was that all the individuals involved have Italian names.

The more the police investigate the more intricate things look, more than they had appeared at first. Tucson is a very pleasant town with no local organized-crime community. Whatever crime element exists, it has been imported from Mexico following a rapid expansion in recent years. A century ago it was a frontier town where poor Mexicans and European miners (some from Italy's Piedmont) settled. Cotton farming, copper mining and smuggling were the main industries and the city's lifeblood. Today the first industry is tourism followed by agriculture and manufacturing. What used to be a little oasis in the middle of the desert has been transformed into a source of wealth by human ingenuity. Tucson sells its desert view the same way Posillipo<sup>1</sup> sells the view of the gulf [of Naples] and its climate.

The origin of Tucson's fortune is in its climate. Doctors first discovered that the weather was ideal for tuberculosis patients and for people with arthritis: dry and warm in winter, cool during summer nights, with clean air and no wind. Slowly it has become a very desirable location and today at least a third of the tourists that come to visit end up moving here. Although the city has expanded and continues to grow, there is no shortage of space, with wide roads and very little traffic. Each house is surrounded by a garden planted with palms and other local trees that give a picturesque look to the area. It almost feels a bit like an American Egypt. The cost of living so far has not gone up, contrary to what has happened in Florida, for instance; and, based on the information I could gather, it is certainly lower than in other American metropolitan areas. The population is

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most picturesque Naples neighborhoods, located on the gulf, north of downtown.

mixed but in general they all share the same desire for peace and quiet. Around a nucleus of tuberculosis patients, retirees and elderly people with savings, a whole community of service providers has sprung up. Real estate investors, developers, builders, business owners, lawyers and manufacturing companies all want to take advantage of the low cost of setting up business here without spoiling the environment. Nearby there are also several military bases, primarily belonging to the Air Force. There are lots of swimming pools, good hotels, a large number of motels and, finally, ranches for people in search of a rustic and simpler life. One drawback is the scarcity of water. Huge pumps work day and night to suck water from the underground to allow plants, animals and people to survive. Everybody is worried that the water is getting harder and harder to reach and it is necessary to drill deeper and deeper into the ground.

The goal of the citizens is to live in peace and quiet and, maybe for the same reason, the criminal underworld has also begun to move here. But the newly arrived gangsters don't indulge in their preferred activities, such as extortion, prostitution, gambling, and loan sharking. They want a quiet life and enjoy the wealth they accumulated in Chicago or Los Angeles, like dignified retirees with a rap sheet long on arrests but short on convictions. Some bought a ranch, some speculate in real estate and everyone flaunts money. The native population is a bit nervous and even the mayor doesn't like this trend. The undesirables, unfortunately, are largely Italian, or at least this is what their names suggest.

Although this region is far from the port cities where Italian immigrants settled in mass, there are still a few tens of thousands Italians living in this area. Recently, a new periodical started publication, the *Tribuna Italiana*, mercifully written almost entirely in English (the few articles in Italian are a graveyard of crimes committed against grammar, syntax and history.) The problem of the arrival of individuals with a checked past and a history of criminal activities was even discussed on local television by the mayor and the chief of police. Since these people cannot be rejected or sent elsewhere, the local community believes that the best strategy is to follow the recommendations of the Kefauver commission, according to which criminals, like parasites, fear

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sunlight. Therefore, the worst for members of organized crime is to be exposed, denounced and to have the spotlight pointed directly at them since, in order to operate effectively, they need the cloak of darkness.

In the meantime, so far nothing has come to light about Janssen and the people who disappeared. We know nothing and, chances are, we will never find out about the murder motive and the missing money.

A couple of years ago there was another case of a man who was found dead. His name ended in a vowel and his features suggested he could be from southern Europe. He was in the trunk of a car, nicely folded like a blanket. Nobody knows who put him there. From what we can surmise, it seems evident that this was a conflict among small fish in the crime underworld: maybe it was a dispute on splitting the loot, or maybe someone shortchanged the big bosses of the money they were owed. The big bosses, meanwhile, remain unknown in their comfortable villas; they attend mass with their families; their children enroll in the best private schools and, when the die, they will have grandiose funerals. When the police interrogate them they never know anything and they always have a perfect alibi, confirmed by the people they were with. If, at a previous point in life, they were convicted for felonies, they have already paid the price to society and now they can be free—often on parole. Once upon a time, when Tucson was just an agglomeration of huts surrounded by the desert and the people didn't have air conditioners, swimming pools and radiators for cold nights, it could happen that a horse thief, captured in the middle of the night, would end up hanging from a tree. If an Indian killed a white, chances are he would end up crucified. Those were tough times, uncivilized times, they say. And it's true. Progress brings swimming pools, radiators, bank accounts, real estate speculation, people released on parole and also a tiny bit of organized crime.

*Tucson, Arizona, January 15, 1961*