



MOB RULE

THE BLOOD AND GORE IN THE SOPRANOS PALES IN COMPARISON WITH THE REAL LIFE ITALIAN MAFIA. ANDY ROUND VISITS SICILY WHERE THE RESIDENTS ARE UP IN ARMS AGAINST THE MAFIA, SOMETIMES AT THE RISK OF THEIR LIVES

WHEN LIBERO GRASSI LEFT HIS SICILIAN HOME AT 7.30AM ON 29 AUGUST 1991, there must have been a lot on his mind. He was on his way to open his textile factory in Palermo for the first time after the long summer break. It was going to be a busy day. Grassi's company employed 100 people and the orders for his pyjamas and underwear were already piling up.

As the businessman pulled into the street the mafia attacked. Five bullets were pumped into the 67-year-old's body, killing him instantly.

For years Grassi had resisted mafia attempts to extort protection money. Despite the kidnap threats, relentless abuse, thefts from his factory and the failed attempts at arson, Grassi had remained defiant. He had even publicly denounced the mobsters (known locally as pizzos) in the newspapers and on television. For his insubordination, the mafia executed him.

It sounds shockingly melodramatic, like a scene from *The Sopranos*, but for Sicily's traders, the story is depressingly familiar. Those that don't pay the mafia pay a different price. The Italian association of industry Confindustria estimates that the Sicilian Cosa Nostra (mafia) annually collects US\$140 billion (\$\$192 billion). That's seven per cent of the Italian GDP, making the mafia the country's biggest earning 'firm'.

"Everyone pays," says anti-mafia campaigner Andrea Cottone. "If the trader is paying, the consumer is paying, it's another tax. If you have a Sicilian coffee that costs 70c, then 10c of that finances violence, trafficking or drugs. In Sicily we believe at least 80 per cent of companies pay the monthly protection money. A small shop may pay US\$500, a hotel perhaps US\$2,000."

Cottone is a member of Addiopizzo (literally 'Goodbye pizzo'), an association set up four years ago to encourage traders to fight extortion. There are now more than 300 Sicilian companies that publicly support the movement



ranging from pizzerias and hotels to shops and gellateria. Addiopizzo also offers 'pizzo-free' holidays publicising its network of members to tourists, organises public anti-mafia demonstrations and provides educational visits to schools.

But there must be serious risks defying the mafia? "Of course. Look at Libero Grassi. He refused to pay and was killed. But this was in 1991, and Libero was just one man. Today we are a group. We are not alone. The community supports us. If someone touches us, it impacts on everyone. If something happens to us, there will be rebellion in the city."

It is this determination that has helped shape a new air of optimism in Sicily. Cottone gives the example of a building materials supplier whose warehouse was burned down by the mafia last year. "We pressured the state and they built him a new one. Our message is, 'If you attack us, we will come back bigger and better.'"

Another sign of change, says Cottone, has come from the Confindustria. The association has vowed to expel any of its members that pays 'pizzo'. Individual companies are also standing up to the mafia. A building contractor in Catania, tired of having his lorries firebombed, recently appeared in court to name his extortionists. In February the owner of a refuse plant in Agrigento refused to pay a US\$120,000 of pizzo a month and his evidence helped police catch 11 mafia members.

Last year a testimony by the owners of the restaurant Antica Focceria San Francisco condemned three mafia bosses to 40 years in jail. The restaurant's owners, brothers Fabio and Vincenzo Conticello, refused an offer to buy stock from mafia-approved sources and denied the mob a US\$75,000 monthly pizzo. After the court case Fabio said: "If you bow your head to the mafia, it's the first step to losing your dignity."

For companies that defy the mafia a new set of considerations come into play. At Antica Focceria there is a 24-hour police guard. Some companies

employ private bodyguards, but for others there is only the collective group support of Addiopizzo.

But these people are defiant. Emporio is a gift shop in Palermo that sells pizzo-free products including T-shirts with anti-mafia slogans and products from land that has been seized from the Cosa Nostra. Their stock of coppolas (or caps) come in bright colours and are designed to be worn at a jaunty angle to counter the traditional 'brown-capped' mafia associations.

"We haven't had any trouble yet. We are not just two people in this room, but 40 traders," says owner Fabio Messina. Nearby is a small hotel, Sole Luna Della Solidarieta, run by Addiopizzo member Patrizia Opipari. She wears a Messina T-shirt that states, "Without the mafia I see colour."

For this new generation of Sicilians, the mathematics of violence does not add up. "There are only about 8,000 mafiosi, compared to the more than five million Sicilians," says Cottone. "But they penetrate every aspect of life. It's

not important how much we pay, but that we pay. It's about bowing to their power. The mafia's symbol is the octopus because their tentacles are everywhere, ready to get us. Here, if you want a job, a place or some influence, you go speak to a 'friend of a friend'. It's no wonder that young people want to leave Sicily and nobody wants to invest in our island."

This theme was examined by author Nino Amadore. He writes in his book *La Zona Grigia* (The Grey Area), "In any Sicilian town not only officials but also professionals collude with mafia bosses - architects, doctors, accountants, lawyers."

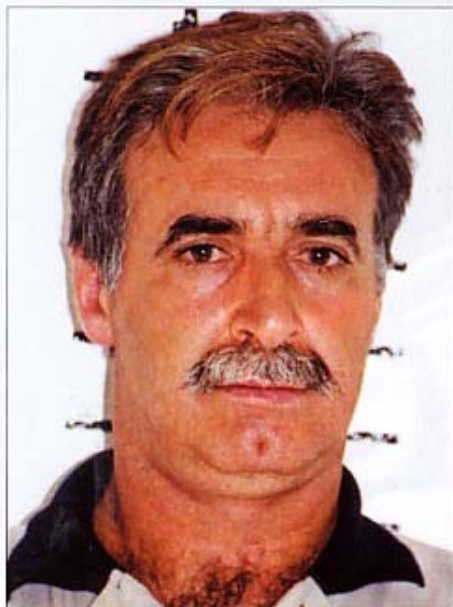
But Addiopizzo members represent a fresh way of thinking that is light years from their fathers and grandfathers. This is a globally-inspired, web-connected generation that endured an early '90s childhood blighted by the criminal 'state within a state', the killings, the curfews in Palermo and the no-go ghettos throughout the city.

1992 was a turning point. Gangsters gunned down the anti-mafia judges

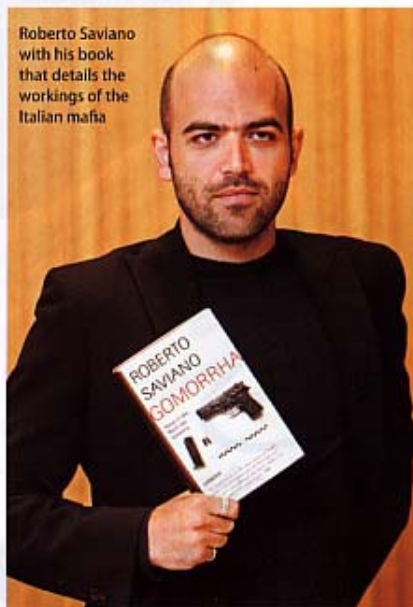
THE MAFIA'S SYMBOL IS THE OCTOPUS BECAUSE THEIR TENTACLES ARE EVERYWHERE, READY TO GET US



Charles Ludano (centre) with friends in Palermo during his exile



Giuseppe Montanti, the boss of an Italian crime family poses for a mug shot following his arrest in 2000



Roberto Saviano with his book that details the workings of the Italian mafia

Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino prompting an immediate crackdown by a society sickened by violence. A year later, Toto Riina, known as the Godfather or 'boss of bosses' was finally brought to justice.

Understandably Cottone mocks the Hollywood glamorisation of the mob. "The Sopranos, The Godfather. That is not glamour! We see the violence and intimidation of the mafia every day. We've seen the blood on the streets."

But while there is a new generation of publicly defiant anti-mafia supporters, the mob has also evolved. "There is not the same level of open criminality now," says Cottone. "The mafia is more interested in legitimate activities and is more white collar than ever before."

Many mafiosi are perceived as respectable people with well-trained professions while, interestingly, the offer of lifetime mob membership is becoming increasingly unappealing to a younger generation who have no appetite for violence or the risk of a crime career cut short prematurely.

But what about the future of Addiopizzo? "When we started, the older generation would rarely talk about the mafia, and even if they did they would say it's not something you can change," says Cottone. "Now, four years later, they say there is hope. We will continue to grow in strength. We started the change and we must see it through to the finish. Nothing can stop us." ■

SCREEN TIME

THE MAFIA MAY BE ABOUT AS UNFASHIONABLE AS DAY-OLD PIZZA IN SICILY BUT TELEVISION AND MOVIE PORTRAYALS OF THE ORGANISED CRIME SCENE CONTINUE TO GRIP POPULAR CULTURE



• *The Godfather*: This is the daddy, grand daddy and, of course, padrino of mafia movies with Francis Ford Coppola at his Shakespearian best. Who cares if it inspired a million bad Don Corleone accents.



• *Goodfellas*: Martin Scorsese was at the height of his power with this violent, true-life story. A vicious, throat-stabbing Joe Pesci steals the film from De Niro.



• *Once Upon A Time In America*: Sergio Leone's classic covers 40 years of crime, with De Niro donning short trousers at the start, to white-haired wigs towards the end. It's convoluted, confused and occasionally bottom-numbing, but for a generation raised on *The Godfather*, it was a welcome return to gangster epics.



• *Untouchables*: Mad, bad and dangerous-to-know Al Capone was a role made for De Niro, and the prohibition backdrop was perfect gangster material for über director De Palma.



• *The Sopranos*: Just when you thought there was not a gangster trick in the book you hadn't seen, along comes Tony and the mob. Indispensable.