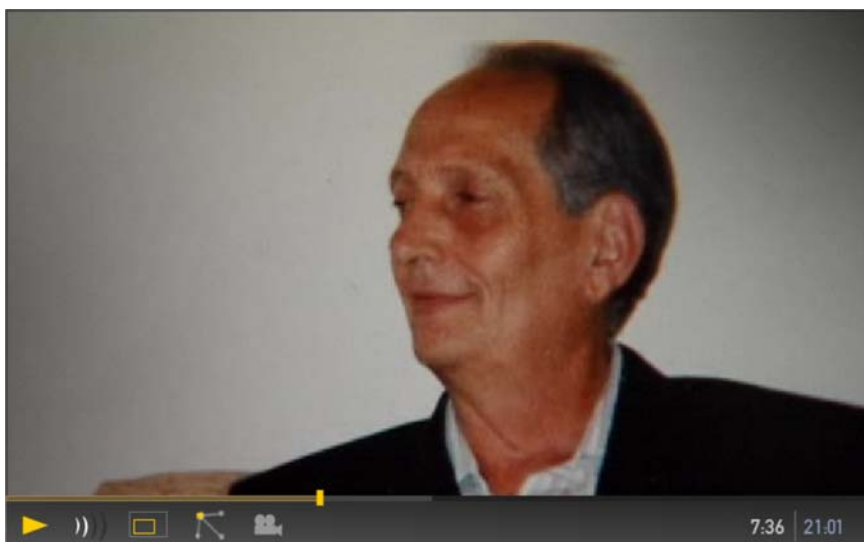


## ITALY: TAKING ON THE MAFIA

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### SYNOPSIS & VIDEO


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Along the ancient streets of Palermo, Sicily, the invisible hand of the Mafia is everywhere at work, but few dare to speak its name. Palermo is the birthplace of the modern Mafia, where the old ways still rule, and mob bosses are often the highest authority -- at least, until recently. In one of Palermo's most popular restaurants, the Focacceria, a new chapter in the city's Mafia history would be written.

It all began when Vincenzo Conticello, the owner, was paid a visit.

"A man I had never seen before asked to meet with me," says Conticello. "He said he wanted to talk about work. He said, 'We know you're not in compliance. I'm your tax collector. Pay me \$800 a month, and you'll have no more problems.'"

Little did Conticello know that the man was under surveillance.

"I looked at him; I felt an intense fear. To this day, when I think about it, my heart drops. I lost my breath. The Mafia was right there in front of me," Conticello says.

The Focacceria is the oldest restaurant in Palermo and has served many Mafiosi over the years, including renowned boss Lucky Luciano. The Conticellos never had to pay protection. But, one day, customers started complaining that their parked cars were being trashed.

"Broken windows, broken headlights, interiors trashed," says Conticello. "There were damages of thousands of e uros, when the dinner itself hadn't cost the customer more than 30 to 40 e uros."

That's when Conticello's mysterious visitor showed up and said he could make the problems go away if Conticello agreed to pay protection money, which everyone here knows as the *pizzo*.

"*Pizzo*, in Sicilian, means the beak of a chicken. It's the act of pecking here and there, eating whatever you can find," Conticello says.

Captain Jacopo Mannucci leads the anti-Mafia squad of the *c arabinieri*, or police force, in Palermo. Mannucci says the *pizzo* is the pillar of Mafia power here.

"In Palermo, 80 percent of businesses pay the *pizzo*," says Mannucci. "Even market stands pay protection. They pay from \$80 to \$ 150. For larger companies, the payments can be thousands of dollars, up to \$15,000 per month."

Investigative journalist Lirio Abbate knows the Mafia's grip first hand. After publishing a groundbreaking book on its ties to government, he narrowly escaped a bomb under his car.

"The Mafia feeds itself as if it were ... Dracula," says Abbate. "This vampire that bites into people and sucks the economy."

"Shop owners and businessmen are scared," he says, "and so they pay [protection] and don't report it. Some are so terrified that they'll deny it in court, even if they are caught on film."

But the police film anyway.

"In the case of t he Focacceria," says Mannucci, "we realized that some suspect people were starting to gravitate around t he Focacceria."

Without Conticello's knowledge, the carabinieri set up more than 50 microphones and cameras at the Focacceria, as part of a major undercover operation. They had identified the man who came to demand the *pizzo* that first day. His name was Giovanni di Salvo, a Mafia foot soldier, whom they hoped would lead them higher up.

"An acquaintance asked me what was wrong; he said I looked worried," says Conticello. "So I told him they had put my dead cat on my doorstep. I had received an anonymous letter threatening to kill me and my family if I didn't pay \$80,000."

Conticello refused. Then, as the police listened in, Conticello received a call. The man on the phone urged him to work something out with the neighborhood boss.

"I'm telling you as your friend," he said.

"But at least help me," Conticello said. "Tell me why!"

"We could do it," the man said. "We could do damage."

Conticello agreed to a meeting, and not long after, the b oss showed up. Again, the police were watching.

His name was Francolino Spadaro, one of Palermo's top Mafia leaders. He told Conticello that his problems could be solved if he hired a man

who would soon come to see him.

"I followed his advice," says Conticello. "Ten to 15 days later, my 'mediator' said he'd successfully negotiated with the extortionists. Now, I owed \$20,000 instead of \$80,000. If I didn't have the money, his boss would give me a loan. The mediator told me I could repay the loan with interest every month."

The police had heard enough. On March 13, 2006, before the Mafia could learn about the operation, Captain Mannucci moved in with his men, arresting di Salvo; his boss, Francolino Spadaro; and two others.

When Conticello arrived at work the next morning, he found carabinieri all around the restaurant. It was only now that he learned that the police had been watching the place for five months.

"I was surprised; I never suspected that there were so many bugs and cameras and everything," he says.

Now, the whole case rested on Conticello's making a daring move: Would he press charges against the Mafia for extortion?

Standing up to Cosa Nostra is still unthinkable to most in Sicily. Everyone remembers what happened to Libero Grassi, who not only refused to pay the *pizzo* but also broke the code of silence about it when he published an open letter to the Mafia in the early 1990s.

Libero's wife, Pina Grassi, remembers how her husband's public refusal to pay the Mafia put him in the media spotlight.

"The letter shocked everyone because it was written by a local businessman. For the first time in our city's history, he had dared to talk publicly about the Mafia and the *pizzo*," she says.

Grassi struck a defiant pose. But when he tried to get others to join him, Cosa Nostra decided to make an example of him.

"It was August 29, a Thursday," says Pina Grassi. "The following Monday, the factory would have re opened after the summer break. Libero left at 7:30. I walked him to the elevator. And a few minutes later, I heard gunshots. Immediately afterwards, someone rang the intercom and said, 'Madam, is your husband home?' And I thought, 'Oh God!' That's when I knew. I went downstairs. I sat on the stairs and really started to wonder, 'What do I do now?'"

"It was an extraordinary murder that allowed the Mafia to send a signal to everyone else," says journalist Lirio Abbate. "But that signal didn't cause business owners to band together. They remained silent for the next 15 years."

But beneath the surface, Palermo's view of the Mafia was changing. After the death of Libero Grassi, a number of other high-profile murders turned public opinion against the Mafia. The old ways were being questioned by a new generation. Then, one morning, Palermo woke up to find the streets covered in mysterious leaflets.

"In July 2004, these leaflets appeared all over the city: 'An entire people who pays the *pizzo* is a people without dignity!'" says Pina Grassi. "Reporters immediately called me. 'Who are they?' they asked me. And I said, 'Who knows? I haven't got a clue. But if they were young people,' I said, 'they could be my nephews -- because they see things the way I do.' Three days later, that door opened, and three kids showed up saying, 'We're your nephews.'"

Laura Nocilla and Raffaele Genova were part of the generation tiring of Mafia control. They knew people in Palermo were paying the *pizzo*. But when it got in the way of opening their pub, they wondered why they

should put up with it.

"When we were about to open -- we had almost paid the first rent -- a friend of ours did a business plan. He included the *pizzo* as part of the expenses."

"We were kidding ourselves that we were living in a normal city," says Genova, "where we could do things as free citizens. That wasn't true."

Laura and Raffaele say Sicily offers few economic prospects to their generation. It's the Mafia, they think, that is keeping their region underdeveloped. Few will invest. That's why they decided to put out the anti-*pizzo* leaflets.

"It was a call to arms, a way to grab attention. Initially, we didn't think we would succeed so well. We simply wanted to open the debate," says Genova.

The media attention to their stunt made them nervous, afraid of becoming Mafia targets themselves. The only way to be safe, they felt, was to get more people involved.

"One Sunday, we went to the stadium," says Nocilla. "We made a banner saying, 'United Against the *Pizzo*.'"

"Underneath it was the address of our website," says Genova. "That's when Giorgio saw us on TV and contacted us."

Giorgio was the first shop owner to join their movement, *Addiopizzo*, or "Good-bye, Pizzo." The idea was to build a coalition of Mafia-free businesses. They launched a *pizzo*-free brand, like free-trade coffee or organic produce.

"It's something concrete," says Lirio Abbate. "They brought together businesses and published a list of their names, urging people to buy only in places that don't pay, that say 'no' to the *pizzo*, 'no' to extortion."

"Why [did we decide] to focus on the *pizzo*, rather than drugs, weapons or shady deals? Because we immediately realized that it was the tool for the Mafia to create a culture that accepts their control of the territory," says Nocilla. "If you take that away, everything else the Mafia does will collapse."

One by one, the Addiopizzo kids signed up businesses. In less than two years, the movement began to pick up steam.

"By then, we were no longer just seven people; we were 3,500 consumers and citizens united to support the law," says Nocilla.

The Addiopizzo kids decided to make a show of force. They declared a *pizzo*-free day for the entire city, and a huge crowd gathered, singing and chanting.

"We were in shock and incredibly moved when night fell, and we realized how many people there were in that piazza," says Nocilla.

"The defiance of these young people is really significant," says Abbate. "It doesn't come in the aftermath of a big Mafia massacre, when you expect people to rise up."

Addiopizzo has grown into an association of more than 300 businesses. Almost 10,000 consumers have pledged to shop *pizzo*-free.

The movement has transformed the atmosphere in Palermo. Salvatore Piparo is part of this new generation -- and one of the last of Palermo's epic storytellers.

"We are all Palermitans," he says. "We all want to be free, and proud to say so."

The story he tells now is about the restaurant owner, Conticello, who shocked the city with his decision to testify in open court against the Mafia.

"The time has come to tell you the story of Palermo's puppeteers and little puppets," Piparo declares at the start of his performance. "Yes, Sir! And that's why you Americans came with microphones and cameras."

The showdown in court was set for a Monday morning.

"The night before [I was to testify], I was walking, as I always do, among tables," says Conticello. "A man at one of the tables told me to come closer. He said, 'I bring you greetings from many friends.' I asked him, 'Who are these friends?' He said: 'You know who wishes you well. And we all know you know how to behave.' That night I slept badly. I didn't sleep well at all."

"The moment I arrived at the court, I saw a huge crowd," Conticello recalls. "Many young people with the 'Goodbye Pizzo' T-shirt. The presence of all these people really gave me strength. I realized that it wasn't just my personal battle; it was the battle of an entire city."

All of Palermo was focused on what happened that first day in his Focacceria.

"I walked him out," Conticello testified that day in court. "He left on a scooter. I wrote down his license plate number."

"Could you describe this man for us? Do you remember what he looked like?" asked his lawyer.

"Of course, I remember him," said Conticello. "He's the man sitting over there."

"Silence fell in that room," Conticello says. "No one even breathed: the prosecutors, the lawyers, the public. The defendants were emotionless. I, on the other hand, breathed. I took a deep breath."

Conticello had dared to name Giovanni di Salvo, the man who had come to the Focacceria to ask for the *pizzo*.

"This had never happened in a Palermo courtroom," says Piparo. "I still remember that day's newspaper. Conticello's picture was on the front page, with his finger pointed at his extortionist."

"And so, Vincenzo became THE HERO OF PALERMO!" Piparo declares, concluding his epic tale. "Thank you, Vince, because, with one finger, you redeemed us! Hurray to Palermo! And her patron saint, Rosalia! Hurray!"

In the meantime, the carabinieri had been stepping up their efforts to combat Cosa Nostra. Last month, Mannucci and his men carried out the biggest operation of the last 20 years. They arrested almost a hundred people, including Palermo's top Mafia leaders, and paraded them through the city before taking them to jail.

"There's been an incredible series of successes in the past two years," says Captain Mannucci. "Everyone in Palermo can really see it for themselves."

These days, Addiopizzo has enlisted the help of Conticello and Pina to spread the word.

"Obviously, courage is always a consequence of fear," Conticello says,

when asked where he found the courage to identify his extortionist. "Without the fear, you'd have no reason to find courage."

Palermo used to be the heart of the Mafia culture in Sicily. But Addiopizzo's presence is only growing stronger and more public.

A year ago, Palermo's first anti-racketeering association was launched. And the powerful Italian business lobby, long silent about the *pizzo* and even critical of Libero Grassi, ruled to expel all businesses that pay protection. But in Palermo -- and elsewhere in Italy -- the Mafia remains deeply entrenched. Most businesses continue to pay.

"What I have made is a small opening; I've made a small hole," says Conticello. "We have to hammer every day so that it becomes bigger, and we can advance in this ongoing war. Mine is just a battle."

"That's the way it is," says Pina Grassi. "It's something that little by little, little by little. ... Will our heroes succeed? Who knows? "

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**Salt Lake City, UT**

I am an Italophile having lived in Northern Italy and traveled everywhere but Sicily. This story was very informative as well as comforting since I will be in Palermo in the spring, and I applaud Vincenzo and the new generation of Sicilian youth for using the media to forward their cause. It is kind of like David vs Goliath, but I know that David will win! I also like the inclusion of the information about Sicilian Storytelling...a wonderful cultural gem that I hope will be embraced by the youth and not become a lost art.

**Vinnie Fanelli  
NY, NY**

Saw this last night on PBS and it was really inspiring. The power of a people working towards a common goal was so evident. Kudos to Vincenzo Conticello for taking a stand!

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