

Italy's battle to defeat the Mafia

The targeting of a British housewife is the latest step in the police's attempts to bring the criminal brotherhood to justice. But they face a formidable opponent

By Peter Popham
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Sixteen years on, the canaries of Gela have begun to sing, and many unsolved murders, like that of Peppe Karate, are being dusted off and looked at again. Old warhorses of the Mafia such as Bernardo Provenzano, the capo di capi arrested last April, are being interrogated about events of 10 and 15 years ago. Then on 11 December, the prosecutors in Sicily decided they had enough information to make a move. In an operation co-ordinated from one end of Italy to the other they swooped on dozens of gangsters from the city, arresting 79 of them.

One of the few that got away was a handsome blonde woman of 44 rejoicing in the name of Ann Hathaway. A former dancer from Middleton in Lancashire, she married Antonio Rinzivillo, head of the Rinzivillo clan, one of the most dangerous in Sicily. But Ms Hathaway, who attended Moorclose Secondary School in Middleton, wasn't just married to the Mob. According to Italian prosecutors, who issued an international warrant against her, she played the part of messenger for her husband while he was in jail for murder and drug-trafficking, and helped him continue to run his criminal clan.

Ms Hathaway has yet to be arrested, but the charges are serious. Yet when she arrived back in the UK recently, she behaved as if she had left her Mafia past behind on a different planet. Introducing herself blithely by her real name on the Friends Reunited website, she said blithely: "I lived in Milan for a few years. I then went to Sicily with my husband ... I came home for Christmas and decided to stay here with my two daughters and give good old England a go! Miss the weather, ha ha ciao."

Sicily is only a couple of hours from Manchester on a budget jet; Italian arrest warrants are taken seriously these days. Yet Ms Hathaway's mistake in imagining that the rainswept terraces of Rochdale were remote enough from her past to protect her is understandable. With all its cliches of feud, retribution, extortion and "honour", there remains something ludicrously exotic about la Cosa Nostra.

But for ordinary Sicilians, the Mafia connection is a thorn in the flesh; the struggle to avoid being typecast and pigeonholed by it is unending.

When Palermo FC visited West Ham in September, some supporters of the London team wore T-shirts proclaiming "Hammers against the Mafia". Fights broke out between rival fans. For the return leg, Toto Cuffaro, the governor of the island, waded into the dispute, having hundreds of T-shirts printed rebutting the slur. "La Mafia mi fa schifo" they read ("The Mafia disgusts me"), and "La Cosa Nostra è liberta" ("Cosa Nostra, literally 'our thing', is freedom"). Shirts were dished out free to Hammers fans, so they could see the error of their ways.

Naive, perhaps, but understandable. Sicily is an island of immense beauty, with a unique and vivid culture. Hordes of foreigners go there on holiday every year and have no nasty encounters. It is well over a decade since Palermo was known as the most violent city in Europe: events like Peppe Karate's murder are far rarer today. So why should the word "Sicily" evoke only one thing, and a singularly nasty thing at that? This year Sicilians have good reason to hope that the climate is changing. Last April, Provenzano was tracked down to a farmhouse outside Corleone and arrested. It was a huge setback for the gangs.

Provenzano had been wanted by the police for 43 years. For the last 13 of those years he had been the unquestioned boss of the Corleonesi, the overwhelmingly dominant crime clan in the island.

News of Provenzano's arrest came minutes after it became clear that Silvio Berlusconi and his centre-right coalition had lost Italy's general election. Berlusconi's fall and Provenzano's arrest, have given the fight against the Mafia new energy and brought many new successes.

Left behind in Provenzano's squalid lair, along with five well-thumbed bibles, were hundreds of letters he had received from his subordinates, seeking advice, asking for orders or informing him of goings on in the great world. For investigators these have proved far more valuable than Provenzano himself, who has so far refused to do more than provide the bare minimum of personal information. The bigliettini enabled them in the ensuing months to track down and arrest dozens of figures big and small in the island's vast criminal underworld.

And as the fight against the Mafia got under way, the Sicilian people began for the first time in many years to challenge their hegemony. Demonstrators took to the streets of Palermo, urging their fellow Sicilians to defy the Mafia by refusing to pay pizzo or protection money. Dozens of shopkeepers signed up to the "Addio Pizzo" movement, begun two years before by a group of young people in the city. The movement continues to grow, and now has 159 shops, restaurants, hotels and other enterprises on board.

A Palermo spring seemed to be in the air as Berlusconi's grip on power grew weaker, and the decision by a white-haired grandmother who runs a chemist's shop to offer herself as governor of Sicily was another sign of it. Rita Borsellino is no ordinary white-haired grandmother. When her brother, the investigating magistrate Paolo Borsellino, was blown up by the Mafia in 1992, she became a figurehead of the popular resistance to the gangs. After Borsellino's death, coming soon after the equally gory killing of his colleague Giovanni Falcone, the people of Palermo demonstrated in their tens of thousands against the Mafia, and Rita Borsellino became their mild-mannered, cultured, quietly vehement mouthpiece.

After years away from the spotlight, last spring she decided to campaign to become governor. Facing down the hostility of the main centre-left parties, she became the single candidate against the incumbent, Toto Cuffaro. Despite his purported disgust with the Mafia and efforts to foist T-shirts on West Ham fans, Mr Cuffaro himself has been under investigation for Mafia association for two years. Wiretaps reproduced in the main Italian papers appear to have caught him in flagrante delicto, though he denies all charges.

With Rita Borsellino in the race, the Mafia was at the heart of the campaign, and the effect on the island was dramatic. "When I announced my candidacy," she told The Independent, "the anti-Mafia movement reignited." That movement had appeared to die in 2001, when all 61 parliamentary seats in the island were won by Berlusconi's centre-right coalition. During Berlusconi's years in power, she said: "Nobody talked about it. There was silence. And in the past five years there have been major steps backwards."

Now things are changing, she said. "I am a point of reference in the fight against the Mafia. Today, there is a broad range of people involved, young people, those who were young in 1992 and the centre-left political parties too. They've rediscovered a common language, one that was lost for years." But she sounded a warning, too. "We haven't won yet," she said. "We're up against a powerful adversary with much of the media at its command."

As it happened her warning was apposite: Borsellino lost the election; Cuffaro, despite everything, was reaffirmed in power. Palermo's new spring went back into the deep freeze. And despite the arrest of Provenzano and the breaking of his network, the ancient, immeasurably cynical Sicilian view of things appeared to be again in the ascendant. Why did the people of Palermo come out on the streets in 1992 to protest against the killing of Falcone and Borsellino? one Sicilian asked me rhetorically earlier this year. "It wasn't because they had been killed by the Mafia as such; it was because Falcone had been blown up while driving on the airport road. Any ordinary Palermitano driving along minding his own business could have been killed in the same blast. That's what they were really protesting about."

If the Sicilian Mafia wanted a motto, the old Churchillian boast "business as usual" would do very well. Because their success, over the decades and indeed the centuries, is all to do with becoming part of the scenery, part of the normal apparatus of life, a crime detection system that really gets results (unlike the official one), a brutally efficient justice system; a service, in other words, that many Sicilians pay through the nose for, and may resent doing so, but from which they also derive benefits. "Voglià di mafia" they call it on the island, "desire for the Mafia": the Mafia that works. The 159 businesses that have signed up to the "Addio Pizzo" campaign are a brave start, certainly - but more eloquent are the tens of thousands that have declined to join.

Yet wiser Sicilians, like Rita Borsellino, are vividly aware of the real costs of having the island's life and economy, not to mention its image, constantly dominated by the Mafia. Everything costs far more than it should, from hotels and taxis and restaurants to the goods in the shops - because, like VAT, the pizzo is passed down the line. The shadow of fear hangs over the island like an ancient curse, because, while the Mafia may no longer be in the habit of decapitating the children of those who can't pay, they still have no compunction about killing when necessary; and the fear they inspire means they have to do no more than whisper their demands.

And as long as the Mafia is in the saddle - deeply entrenched in government, the bureaucracy, the health service, even in the judiciary and the police -

the island's economy will remain stuck in the mud. Because no outsider wants to tangle with those forces.

As the new year gets under way, the struggle against the Mob is finely balanced. New revelations by turncoats are challenging the power of gangs such as Rinziello's. In November Romano Prodi's government appointed a Sicilian journalist called Francesco Forgione president of the Anti-Mafia Commission, a man with a strong track record in fighting organised crime.

Rita Borsellino immediately fired off a congratulatory message.

In his first speech in the new job, Forgione painted a daunting picture of the task he faced. The Mafia, he said "have changed their nature and internationalised their activities", to the extent that they are now an economic force "with a capacity of profit accumulation worth around €100m per year." Only a fraction of the money they make through extortion and other criminal activities goes back into crime, he said; most is invested in legitimate financial activities. "The centre of our work," he said, "is to identify and strike this wealth." Because that vast wealth is what causes "all the distortions in the process of modernisation, connected to the looting of resources, the slaughter of the environment" and all the other ills the Mafia bring with them.

It's a vast challenge - far bigger and more difficult than tracking down a decrepit old Godfather, or swooping on Antonio Rinziello and his men. But courage was always required of those who take up this fight - courage and a sort of lunacy. Pietro Grasso, the Sicilian who arrested Provenzano, cites a saying of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci as his guide in life. "In life one needs pessimism of the reason," it goes, "and optimism of the will."

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