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In search of the real Godfather

After 43 years in hiding, police have finally caught up with the Mafia's 'capo di capi', Bernardo Provenzano. But, as Peter Popham finds, the Sicilian gangster's shadow still looms large in his home town of Corleone

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Travelling to the town of Corleone on the trail of the Mafia, one has a strong sense of going where others, many others, have been before, and where you, like those who have preceded you, aren't at all welcome. I stand in the only bar in the town's cramped main square, opposite the council building and the main church, and drink a cup of tea and eat a Sicilian pastry. The walls of the dingy bar are lined with adverts for "Amaro Don Corleone", a Sicilian digestif, and stills from the Godfather films. I am the only customer. The silence hangs heavy. The tea is too hot to drink.

"What kind of journalist are you?" the man behind the bar asks, in a frigid tone. I had not told him my profession.

Everyone knows why you, so obviously a stranger, are here. There is only one reason any foreigner comes here. It is the only thing from which Corleone makes any tourist money. But that doesn't mean they have to like it.

My first appointment in Corleone is easy. I park my rented car and enter the Commissariato, the office of the superintendent of state police. After some time an officer with a grey streak running down the middle of his hair turns up and tells me to follow him in my car.

We drive out of the town going south, in the direction of Prizzi and Agrigento, then take an unmarked turning and drive up and over a steep hill, arriving in a small, placid valley lined with small farmhouses shut up for the winter. The narrow road peters out a couple of hundred metres away. We stop our cars and get out. "That's it," he says, pointing to a humble cottage on the left, set in a few acres of grass with small fruit trees coming into leaf. So this is the place.

"Where were the police video cameras?" I ask. The affable policeman laughs and waves an arm at the hills that surround the valley. "That's for you to work out." Policemen the world over love secrets, especially pointless ones.

From somewhere on the low hill to the right of the lane, the police kept this cottage under surveillance for a long time. Then at 11.18am on 11 April, Silvio Berlusconi lost Italy's general election. It was momentous news, coming after a night of intolerable tension and five years of bizarre malgovernance, the end of a strange era. Few events could have trumped the news of Berlusconi's defeat: a terrorist attack on central Rome, perhaps, or the assassination of some grandee. Then, 10 minutes later, came the flash: Bernardo Provenzano - "capo di capi della Mafia Siciliana" - had been arrested after 43 years in hiding. Here, in this cottage. Out of a clear blue sky.

No policeman or reporter had managed to get close enough to Provenzano to take his picture in more than 40 years. The only images of him that existed were police photofits, based on an existing mug shot of the fresh-faced, wild-eyed young murderer. Over the years it had been judiciously altered, the hair whitened, creases and jewels added to the face, the wide eyes given a weight of worry and woe.

The first footage seen on the television news showed a barely discernible figure in a mass of policemen, hustled from his car and into Palermo police headquarters while a small, noisy crowd gave clenched fist salutes and shouted "bastardo!" Later we got a better view, in film shown over and over again: a very short, somewhat portly figure, walking with small, firm steps, looking over his metal-framed glasses with an expression of intense yet friendly attention, smiling broadly.

What an amazing apparition it was, after all this time. And amazing, too, the gangster's self-possession. When they catch up with Osama bin Laden, we can be sure it won't be like this. It will be like the miserable arrest of Saddam Hussein, hauled, wild-haired, shabby and scared stiff, out of a hole in the ground. But Bernardo Provenzano carried himself, and was permitted to carry himself before the video cameras, like the president of some small rogue state, who has suddenly and improbably appeared in our midst: like Kim Jong-il, suddenly among us. Before being carted off to spend the rest of his days behind bars (he has received several life sentences in absentia for his murders) he went from one policeman to the next, shaking the hands of the men who had arrested him.

Bernardo Provenzano was for 13 years, and remains to this day, even in his cell in Temi jail, north of Rome, the unchallenged boss of the most powerful criminal organisation in Europe. The Sicilian Mafia may no longer be the richest crime gang in Italy: the 'Ndrangheta

of Calabria, on the toe of the Italian boot, is said to have a higher turnover these days, the Neapolitan Camorra has a class-A drug smuggling and peddling racket that is worth billions every year. These days you have to reckon, too, with the Russian gangs, the Chinese Triads, the mobs from Serbia and Romania and Bulgaria muddying the European waters and clouding the picture. Yet the Sicilian Mafia remains a formidable criminal organisation with unique strengths.

It is the only gang with a hierarchy of power that has remained stable now for more than two decades. It is the only organisation that has consistently sought and obtained ties with the top tiers of Italian government since the end of the Second World War. Giulio Andreotti, the most important post-war Italian politician, served six times as prime minister, and when he first attained that post in 1972 it was with the help of the Mafia. He was cleared of complicity with the Mafia by Italy's highest court three years ago - but only because he had committed the offence too long ago for it still to be considered a crime in the indulgent world of Italian justice. Silvio Berlusconi's right hand man, Marcello Dell'Utri, co-founder of the Forza Italia party and today a senator, noted for his collection of antiquarian books, is fighting a nine-year sentence for the same crime. The Governor of Sicily, Salvatore Cuffaro, is on trial for Mafia offences in Palermo at the moment, but has continued to exert power and to campaign for re-election without a hiccup.

Stability and this web of links with legitimate political power - and only a fraction of the web is ever visible, or comes to light years after it has ceased to matter - are two of the things that makes the Mafia special. The third could reasonably be claimed by Bernardo Provenzano - if he ever decided to speak, which prosecutors think unlikely - as his personal achievement.

The Mafia no longer kill. Palermo used to be the most violent city in Europe, with dozens of shootings every year. Then, in 1992, they went overboard, killing the anti-Mafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino and many others in a crazed bid to take on the Italian state. In a way it was their "fall of the Berlin Wall" moment, their hysterical reaction to the crumbling of the political parties that had maintained the (omega) Italian status quo ever since the end of the war, and for the first time since Mussolini's pre-war crackdown, the state and its high officials began taking the Mafia threat seriously. In 1993 the then capo di capi, Salvatore "Totò" Riina, a tiny man like Provenzano, was arrested and put on trial. Many of his top lieutenants followed.

Provenzano, a son of Corleone like Riina, had run the Mafia with him in an uneasy Box-and-Cox diarchy in which the two men rarely showed up in the same place at the same time. Now Provenzano took over. And despite his early fame as a gunman, nicknamed "the Tractor" for his gift for mowing down his enemies, the semi-literate mobster began living up to his later nickname, "il Ragioniere" (the Accountant). It was business as usual in Sicily, with the uncanny difference that the guns fell silent, and have been silent now for 13 years. Yet under Provenzano's control the Mafia has become more powerful than ever.

Then, two years ago, posters suddenly appeared all over Palermo. They were edged in black like the death notices that still get pasted up in southern Italian villages when someone dies. But the wording read, in an austere, sanserif type, "An entire people that pays pizzo [slang for the protection money paid to the Mafia] is a people without dignity". The posters bore no name or any other attribution.

"They caused chaos," says Salvo Forello, a young lawyer and a member of the group responsible for the posters, "because we had put them up anonymously. So everyone in the city wanted to know, who's done it? At the same time, newspapers started to inquire into the problem of the rackets. And this brought attention back to issues that had long been abandoned, left to one side."

With his long hair and jeans, Forello still looks like the student he was until a couple of years ago. He and his friends, all former students, had originally got together with the idea of opening what Salvo calls an "eco-pub" in the city centre, a place to find organic food, drink and other products. "We got talking about this project, and somebody said, what do we do if we get asked for a pizzo? And we all agreed that we couldn't submit to it."

But they quickly learnt that if they stuck to that intent, they would be in a small, highly vulnerable minority. "We looked into the situation and found that eight shopkeepers out of 10 in Palermo pay protection money to the Mafia. It struck us that we were living in a paradoxical situation: nobody says anything about it but we are living in a city where freedom of enterprise is non-existent. Because if you open a shop, you automatically have to pay, not just the tax to the state which is providing you with services, but also a tax to a Mafia organisation which promises to protect you - against itself. Practically everybody pays pizzo, and nobody says anything. There is total silence"

Silence: it has always been the mark of the Mafia. Omertà, the code of honour, is the rule of silence, of refusing to snitch. But even among their own kind, Sicilian mafiosi do not blabber. That's their complaint about their American cousins, they talk too much, they brag, they draw attention.

Silence is not just a Mafia thing, it's a Sicilian thing: connected to the place's insularity, its instinct for survival through all the invasions and occupations it has suffered. People from Naples, the other pole of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in which Sicily was subsumed for centuries, are the most loquacious of Italians. The Sicilians are the most tight-lipped. (omega)

And 40 or 50 years ago, silence about the Mafia was total. "Almost no one in Sicily spoke about the Mafia," says Leoluca Orlando, a campaigning anti-Mafia Mayor of Palermo during the mid-1980s. "Nobody used the word. It was something everybody feared but nobody spoke of."

This began to change in 1992, when the Palermitani came out on the streets in their thousands to protest the mob's murders. For the first time the Mafia was discussed as the common enemy. But Salvo Forello thinks there was a particular reason for that: "Giovanni Falcone was killed by a huge bomb on the motorway. People were furious, they said anybody could have been killed. The massacres caused a reaction among the people because they too felt themselves to be under attack, it was a natural reaction to an act of war." But as soon as the acute, physical danger passed, he says, "The people dropped their guard."

Salvo and his girlfriend, Monica Pinzino, are glad to talk about the Mafia, because they are founder members of "Addio Pizzo", an initiative that sprung from their original anti-Mafia poster campaign, enlisting consumers and tradesmen to refuse to pay. More than 7,000 members of the public and 100 shopkeepers have signed up: a drop in the bucket in this city of one million people, but a start. Also willing to broach the subject are campaigning communists and priests and trade unionists, people such as Rita Borsellino, sister of murdered judge Paolo Borsellino who has become an anti-Mafia figurehead: people, in other words, who have made a special commitment to the cause.

That leaves about 99 per cent of the population who would really rather talk about football, cooking, or the weather.

After I had paid my respects to Provenzano's hideout, I drove back into Corleone, down the steep streets between ugly blocks of flats

and shops, emerging at the sudden oasis of a classic town park full of palm trees behind heavy, wrought-iron railings. On the gate, next to an advertisement for another local digestif, Amaro Il Padrino (the Godfather), is a poster advertising the 28th anniversary of the assassination of Peppino Impastato, a trade unionist and vigorous Mafia opponent: "La Mafia uccide - il silenzio pure!" (the Mafia kills - silence too). The poster has been ripped down the middle.

I walk the torpid streets - it is just after one in the afternoon, and the town is heading for the hammock - and get that particular beady look from the few shops yet unshuttered: what sort of journalist are you? From the surrounding hills comes the narcotic scent of broom. I happen upon a handsome old town house converted into a local museum and ring the bell. A middle-aged priest with greying hair, who was clearly about to sit down to lunch, instead guides me around the museum.

Father Giovinco Calogero turns out to be an ardent evangelist for Corleone. The town, he says, has produced not one but two saints, St Leoluca and St Bernardo. It has produced an important Futurist artist in Pippo Rizzo. In between there was Giovanni Naso from the town, a 16th-century sculptor, another person who invented a special type of clock, and another who came up with a new type of grinder for grain. Bold new ideas flowed from the town: the Patti Agrari, for example, a historic socialistic deal between farmers and landowners, framed here back in 1893. "Democracy was born here," enthuses Father Calogero, "democracy and liberty sprang from this town."

He shows me the visitors' book: people from Japan, China, Chicago and other parts of Italy have admired the museum's clocks and grinders. "A lot of foreign visitors," I muse. "What brings them all here I wonder?"

It has become unavoidable. "They all come for the Mafia," Calogero explodes with disgust. "For the Mafia and nothing but the Mafia! But the Mafia belongs to the past. It wasn't even born here, it was born in Bisacquino, 20km up the road." And just to show how misguided these tourists are with their fixation on something of no importance, he gives me a tour of his secret treasure, a richly frescoed oratorio called Madonna del Soccorso, the Madonna of Help, next to one of his two churches.

Of course some of the most famous mafiosi are very religious, I point out slyly, gazing up at the angels and saints: Provenzano himself had five Bibles in his secret cottage, with inspirational passages highlighted. "Yes, I know the boys, Provenzano's two children, and the wife. They are lovely people. Luciano Liggio became religious too," he adds: Liggio, the super-violent capo di capi, godfather to Riina and Provenzano, who established the dominion of the Corleonesi over the other Sicilian Mafia clans and died in jail in 1993. "When he was in prison he used to read the Bible and paint holy pictures. It's understandable, given the life they lead..."

He has known all these people, these semi-mythical villains from the crime pages, he has shared these shady streets with them. And this is all he has to say on the matter.

Before leaving Corleone, I am given directions by a Sicilian journalist friend and take a detour past the garish pink villa inhabited by Saveria Palazzolo, Provenzano's common-law wife, and the grown-up children of whom Father Calogero had spoken fondly. A few yards from the offices of local and state police and the Carabinieri, it was from this house that the fatal parcel of laundry betraying Provenzano's whereabouts began its meandering journey to his cottage, barely 2km away.

As I crawl slowly past the house, a middle-aged man, bald and wearing a cardigan, emerges on to the street and eyeballs me ferociously until I turn the corner and drive away.

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