# The Transatlantic Syndicate

On 22 April 1974, a small group of *mafiosi* sat down to chat in an ice-cream bar in Saint-Léonard, Montreal's Little Italy. Two of them led the discussion. One was the bar's owner, Paolo Violi, underboss of Cosa Nostra in Quebec. Violi's guest had come directly from Sicily: he was Giuseppe 'Pino' Cuffaro, a Man of Honour who also hailed from the province of Agrigento. The two spoke a common jargon of mafia power politics. A jargon which – through a hubbub of background conversation, a clatter of crockery and the hiss and crackle of a secret microphone – Canadian police were able to record.

Violi began the pleasantries: 'So the journey went well then? Let's kiss one another.'

In reply, Pino Cuffaro could hardly wait to unload his news from Sicily. 'Well, Paolo, before you drink this cappuccino, I've got to announce a nice surprise, an affectionate surprise that is naturally close to our hearts . . . Carmelo has been made representative in our village.'

Then, between sips of coffee, there followed a long bulletin on the latest Cosa Nostra appointments in the far-off province of Agrigento. Who was provincial boss, who were the *capimandamento* (precinct bosses), who were the *consiglieri*, and who had been initiated. They discussed the state of Cosa Nostra across Sicily, remarking on how the Palermo Commission was still suspended. And they dropped the names of mutual friends, like don 'Ntoni Macrì – the 'ndrangheta boss from Siderno who was also a member of Cosa Nostra (and who, unbeknownst to all, would enjoy his last game of bowls just a few months later).

But Pino Cuffaro had not come all the way to Quebec just to

bring his Canadian friends up to speed with the ins and outs of the old country. He had come to resolve a delicate issue of diplomatic protocol. Could a Man of Honour from Sicily arrive in America and assume full citizenship of the Cosa Nostra community there? Underlying this question was the fundamental issue of whether Cosa Nostra was a single transatlantic brotherhood, or whether the American and Sicilian branches were separate entities. The positions were so entrenched, and the argument so strained, that the men had to meet twice.

Paolo Violi, the Canadian gangster, argued for a five-year rule: any Sicilian who arrived in Canada would have to spend five years being monitored before he was granted full status. The Sicilian visitor wanted no barriers to be put up between Sicily and the New World.

Who was right? The short answer is that it does not really matter. In the mafia world, rules are very important, but they are also pliable: *mafiosi*, like the rest of us, tend to interpret rules in ways that suit their own interests. Even a rule as basic as the relationship between the American and Sicilian arms of Cosa Nostra was not permanently fixed.

It is significant that Paolo Violi, the ice-cream-bar owner who was such a stickler for the five-year rule about admission to the American Cosa Nostra, was actually a living example of the rule's flexibility. For he was Calabrian. His bar was called Reggio – after the city in southern Calabria, birthplace of the 'ndrangheta. Like many young Calabrian hoods who emigrated to major centres of organised crime in the Americas, Violi made his career not in the 'ndrangheta, but in the American Cosa Nostra. America was where closer ties between the Calabrian and Sicilian mafias were pioneered, and where those ties persisted. But despite the American mafia's long history of openness to newcomers, even Calabrian newcomers, in the spring of 1974 the Calabrian immigrant Paolo was adamant that Sicilian *mafiosi* would have to spend five years under observation before they were entitled to full membership of Cosa Nostra in the United States.

So the constitutional rights and wrongs of Violi's position are much less important than the question of why he was arguing in that way – of what naked self-interest he was trying to drape in constitutional clothes.

By the time of the ice-cream-bar meeting, the collapse of the French Connection was already beginning to intensify mafia involvement in importing heroin to the United States. Violi was a territorially based boss, not a narcotics trafficker. As such, he felt threatened by this massively lucrative cross-territorial business that he could not entirely control. In the specific case of Quebec, the people who worried Violi were the Cuntreras and Caruanas: two Sicilian mafia bloodlines intertwined over several generations into a single clan-cum-business network. Two members of that clan, Pasquale and Liborio Cuntrera, had moved to Canada in 1951 – more or less when Paolo Violi arrived. Subsequently, many more members of the Cuntrera-Caruana clan joined the Sicilian mafia diaspora that followed the Ciaculli bomb in 1963. Yet rather than settling permanently in one place, the new exiles converted themselves into roving heroin smugglers, a shifting international network that financed, sourced and shipped heroin in bulk, and then laundered and invested the profits. Over the coming years, their traces would be found in Canada, the USA, Mexico, Brazil, Honduras, the Bahamas, Antigua, the Caribbean tax haven of Aruba, India, Germany, Switzerland – and Woking in Surrey. Venezuela was the clan's long-term base, an offshore heroin trading post for the US market. Here the Cuntrera-Caruanas owned a vast, fortified cattle ranch near the Colombian border that had its own airport. When Pasquale Cuntrera's son got married, the event was covered on television and the Venezuelan President was a witness.

Giuseppe Cuffaro, the *mafioso* who argued with Paolo Violi at the ice-cream-bar meeting, was a travelling salesman for the Cuntrera-Caruana group. That is why he wanted free entry to the Canadian market for mafia emissaries.

The Cuntrera-Caruana network centred on a set of smart,

well-connected and mobile *mafiosi* whose spectacular wealth allowed them to win friends anywhere in the world. The Cuntrera-Caruanas and the other roving heroin traders have been referred to as a mafia in their own right. They formed what we could call a Transatlantic Syndicate whose power floated dangerously free of the territories controlled by the Sicilian and American branches of Cosa Nostra. Such men could dictate terms to local bosses like Violi in whichever territory they found market or investment opportunities. The loyalty of soldiers to their captain or boss could easily be bought. Thus it was that, on 22 January 1978, Paolo Violi paid the ultimate price for his finicky, protectionist interpretation of the mafia's rules when he was shot dead as he played cards in his ice-cream bar.

Canada was not the only place where wire-taps registered the way in which the Transatlantic Syndicate was upsetting the mafia balance of power in the late 1970s. In a justly famous undercover sting, FBI Special Agent Joseph D. Pistone infiltrated New York's Bonanno Family by posing as 'Donnie Brasco'. The memorable 1997 movie of Pistone's story, starring Johnny Depp and Al Pacino, fails to capture the operation's crucial historical context. Pistone/Brasco was a first-hand witness to the rise of the 'zips' or 'greasers'. These were derogatory terms that local *mafiosi* used to refer to Sicilian Men of Honour who had recently set up shop in America. There were two reasons why New York *mafiosi* were anxious about the new arrivals. First, because the zips had been granted the exclusive right to supply wholesale heroin for New York's Bonanno and Gambino Families. Second, because they formed an autonomous faction whose power within American Cosa Nostra was on the rise. What soldiers in the Bonanno Family called 'zips' were actually members of the Transatlantic Syndicate.

Pistone's body mike recorded two New York wise guys as they

reacted to the news that some of the Sicilians were going to be awarded ranks within the American organisation:

> Those guys [the zips] are looking to take over everything. There's no way we can make them captains. We'd lose all our strength.
>
> Them fucking zips ain't going to back up to nobody. You give them the fucking power, if you don't get hurt now, you get hurt three years from now. They'll bury you. You cannot give them the power. They don't give a fuck. They don't care who's boss. They got no respect.

The zips had names and faces. John Gambino was one: he had moved from Palermo to Cherry Hills, New Jersey, in 1964. Salvatore Inzerillo was another: he was the nephew of a Palermo boss. Like the Cuntrera-Caruana clan, these were mobsters with a great many exotic stamps in their passports, and a vast international skein of relatives by blood and marriage to support them. Members of the Transatlantic Syndicate like these were responsible for what became known as the Pizza Connection, a tag coined during the huge US police investigation that eventually cut out a small part of the Transatlantic Syndicate in the mid-1980s.

The members of the Transatlantic Syndicate were frighteningly powerful, and they also worked together. As early as 1971, the Venezuelan secret services looked into the Cuntrera-Caruana cattle ranch, and found that its shareholders included the following: Nick Rizzuto, the Cuntrera-Caruanas' man in Montreal (he would eventually take the reins in Quebec after the murder of Paolo Violi); John Gambino from Cherry Hills; and Salvatore 'Little Bird' Greco, the head of the Palermo Commission at the time of the Ciaculli bomb, who had abandoned Sicily to become a South America-based narcotics importer.

The Transatlantic Syndicate had the keys to the United States

heroin market: anyone who wanted to supply bulk dope to the East Coast had little choice but to go through them. Our Sicilian broker, Gaspare 'Mr Champagne' Mutolo, knew that from experience. In 1981, the first of his ships delivered 400 kilograms of ready-refined heroin from Thailand: half of it went to the Cuntrera-Caruanas, and half to John Gambino in Cherry Hills.

Back in Sicily, the Transatlantic Syndicate carried even more clout than it did in Canada or the United States. One member, Salvatore Inzerillo, returned to Palermo in 1973, and his uncle immediately ceded to him his job as representative of the Passo di Rigano Family and then his seat on the Commission. Other bosses who were part of the Transatlantic Syndicate included triumvirate members Tano Badalamenti and Stefano Bontate.

The Transatlantic Syndicate enjoyed the cream of Cosa Nostra's contacts in the world of banking. Some of their narcotics profits were laundered and invested by the notorious fly-by-night financiers and P2 Masonic Lodge members, Michele Sindona and Roberto Calvi. Both Sindona and Calvi would end up dying in circumstances that remain mysterious to this day: Calvi was found hanging under Blackfriars Bridge in London in 1982; Sindona drank a coffee laced with cynanide in prison in 1986.

The Transatlantic Syndicate enjoyed enormous traction in business and politics too. They were close to the Salvo cousins, fabulously wealthy barons of Sicily's privatised tax-collection system. They were also close to Salvo Lima, the Young Turk. Through Lima and the Salvos, but also directly, they had the ear of the most powerful politician in Italy: Giulio Andreotti, seven times Prime Minister by the end of his parliamentary career, and the man whose faction in the Christian Democrat Party included Lima and his Sicilian followers. According to the Italian Supreme Court, in a verdict from 2004, Andreotti displayed 'an authentic stable and friendly availability' towards Stefano Bontate et al

until 1980, when Cosa Nostra's increasing violence alienated him.

Never in the long history of the Sicilian mafia has there been a concentration of might and opulence to compete with the Transatlantic Syndicate. That is why, in 1981, the Transatlantic Syndicate became the target of a war of extermination.

But before war broke out once more in Sicily, the camorra in Campania was revolutionised by the most influential boss of the twentieth century.