

Save the Mafia Children

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An Italian Model in the Fight Against Organized Crime

Giuliana Adamo

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***AN ITALIAN MODEL IN THE FIGHT
AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME ****

GIULIANA ADAMO



**UNIVERSITÀ
DEL SALENTO**

2024



10

Collana diretta da
Salvatore Colazzo, Piergiuseppe Ellerani e Demetrio Ria

La collana “Sapere pedagogico e Pratiche educative” intende proporre volumi collettanei e monografici in cui la tensione operativa si sappia coniugare con solidi fondamenti epistemologici.

La pedagogia nel corso del XX secolo è passata da una dipendenza dalla filosofia prima, e dalla psicologia poi, alla conquista di una piena autonomia scientifica, che è fatta di capacità di dialogo con una pluralità di discipline, chiamate a contribuire all’elaborazione di modelli di spiegazione e di intervento capaci di inquadrare il soggetto col suo bisogno di identità, la sua tensione progettuale, nel contesto delle relazioni da lui stabilite con l’ambiente socio-culturale in cui è incardinato, con gli altri soggetti, impegnati come lui nella ricerca di senso.

La pedagogia, che vorremmo veicolare attraverso la collana parla di un uomo che è “storicamente determinato”, e, in quanto tale, continuamente proteso a modificare le condizioni del suo esistere, attraverso una costante negoziazione di significati, che, in maniera – verrebbe da dire – frattale lo interessa, dalla costituzione del suo *bios*, via via a salire fino alla dimensione che qualcuno ha definito dell’*uomo-mondo*. La collana intende, in tale quadro, trattare dei processi di insegnamento/apprendimento iscrivendoli nel più lato processo che fa dell’uomo un soggetto pienamente culturale impegnato progettualmente ad auto-costituirsi.

Tutti i saggi contenuti nel presente volume sono stati sottoposti a peer review con il sistema double blind.

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SAVE THE MAFIA CHILDREN.

AN ITALIAN MODEL IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME*

* The original edition of this book was published in late 2019 (G. Adamo, *Save the Mafia Children. Liberi di scegliere. Un modello italiano nella lotta contro la criminalità organizzata*, Preface by Nicola Gratteri & Antonio Nicaso, Roma, Castelvechi, ISBN: 9788832826685).

It should be noted that the main facts discussed refer to the period 2011-2019, covering the duration of Roberto Di Bella's official mission as President of the Juvenile Court in Reggio Calabria (2011-2020). From 2020 Di Bella is President of the Juvenile Court in Catania, where he continues to apply his revolutionary system.

Editorial Note

The series "Pedagogical knowledge and educational practices" inaugurated in 2017 has reached its tenth appointment. All the volumes published are the result of a continuous effort to actively participate in the current debates among the national and international scientific community. This volume inaugurates a new editorial line, namely that of monographs. Significant monographic volumes will be periodically published examining issues and problems in a more organic way encouraging interdisciplinary exchanges. Furthermore, publication of essays and articles in other languages than Italian will be encouraged in order to spread the editorial series internationally.

Nota Editoriale

La Collana "Sapere pedagogico e pratiche educative" inaugurata nel 2017 è giunta al suo decimo appuntamento. Tutti i volumi pubblicati sono frutto del continuo sforzo di partecipare in modo attivo ai dibattiti più attuali della comunità scientifica nazionale ed internazionale. Questo volume apre un'altra linea editoriale, ovvero quello delle monografie. Verranno periodicamente pubblicati volumi monografici significativi che affrontino temi e problemi in modo più organico con l'obiettivo di favorire ancor più lo scambio interdisciplinare. Inoltre, proprio per proiettare la Collana sul piano internazionale dai prossimi numeri si favorirà la pubblicazione di saggi e articoli in lingua originale.

Author's Note

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Nota dell'Autrice

Vorrei porgere i miei ringraziamenti a Castelvechi, l'editore del volume italiano, al Dipartimento di Scienze Umane e Sociali dell'Università del Salento, e ai curatori della Collana, in particolare Salvatore Colazzo e Demetrio Ria. Infine, un grazie all'Associazione Culturale *Piazza del Mondo* che ha sostenuto questo progetto.



“To exist means to be able to choose”

(Søren Kierkegaard)

*“And then...why are you crying? I want to
know!*

Answer me, speak... Don't cry any more.

It is all over, now you are down here.”

(Alberto Masala)



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PREFACE

By **Giuliana Adamo**

In the past three decades the Court, together with the Juvenile District Attorney's Office in Reggio Calabria (South of Italy), has handled more than one hundred cases against minors for mafia-related offenses and over fifty cases of homicide or attempted homicide. Nowadays the same Court finds itself judging the children or siblings of those who were tried earlier, all belonging to the well-established Mafia families of the area. Hence the need for a turning point, which has led to the adoption of civil proceedings for the revocation/suspension/limitation of parental rights, with the aim to provide these children a psychologically and physically normal, calm, and socially acceptable upbringing, thus allowing them the freedom to choose their own destiny, liberated and emancipated from criminal models and from the hopeless constraints of their dominant family teachings. This reintegration and rehabilitation process also includes a parallel component for their parents, especially the mothers, if they agree to its undertaking with the assistance of the State. After a birth in a mafia family, there begins an educational process by which the parents raise their children to adulthood. Here lies the topic of the present volume. Because it has been demonstrated that the 'Ndrangheta is founded on the blood ties between its members – a guarantor even today of its survival and power – it is through intervention within this family structure that the State must act to counter the transmission of mafia values to these children. In other words, the 'Ndrangheta is like an army always at war against the State and the Law and, as with all armies, it has a constant need to beef up the ranks of its soldiers. These soldiers are the children of its members. With the removal of its soldiers, the army witnesses the dismantling of its *raison d'être*. And for the sake of their children, mothers as well begin to find reasons to dissociate from the system of mafia affiliation. This point has led to the revolutionary legal and social action of Roberto Di Bella, former President of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria (September 2011- September 2020)^{1, *} and Giuseppina Latella, former President of the District Attorney's Office Juvenile Division, his comrade of many battles. As Di Bella notes:

¹ Roberto Di Bella (born in 1963) in 1993-2005 was appointed as a judge at the Juvenile Court in Reggio Calabria and, later in 2006-2011 in Messina. From 2020 Di Bella is President of the Juvenile Court of Catania. State.

The objective is to safeguard these children, to give them an opportunity to have cultural and social opportunities that are distant from their realities; to remove them from an inevitable fate of criminal violence, harsh imprisonment and early death.

CHAPTER ONE: CHILDREN



1. Background

... Once upon a time there was a Calabrian mother who had gone to find a man of the law in order to beseech him to change the path and life of her twelve-year-old child who, as a gift for first communion, instead of a bicycle had asked for “a Kalashnikov, to take out a bad judge.” This was not just any mother. She was a mother in an ‘Ndrangheta family. She, along with all her family members, was part of an ‘ndrina.¹ Had they discovered her visiting a man of the State, and even more so the judge who had sent her son away to live for a time in a rehab center, they would have made her pay very dearly. Her child was still young, he did not yet understand the world of adults, and he wanted to take out of the judge who had taken him away from his family full of murdered and incarcerated relatives, and from his mother, terrified and unable to protect him. But, little by little, the mother had discovered that the judge, and those who had cared for her child in her stead, were not really so bad. They were in fact generous and good people. Perhaps they wanted and truly were able to save her little boy from a destiny of crime and violence which, by hereditary tradition, the Mafia family into which he was born had reserved for him.

This is not a work of fiction. It is a factual account, based on the report narrated to the author by Roberto Di Bella,² the “judge” of these first few lines of a desperate mother’s recent story.³ This reading immediately gives rise to some initial questions, the responses to which are always necessary in order to begin any story: When? Where? Who? What? How?

When? In 2016.

¹ ‘*Ndrina* is synonymous with “crime syndicate” in the Calabrese slang of the ‘Ndrangheta. It is managed predominantly by one *family* – a term to be understood in its most natural form, meaning blood relatives – that controls a particular territory such as a town or a city neighborhood, and by other affiliated parties.

² There are only four magistrate judges in the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, and only two magistrates in the adjacent Juvenile District Attorney’s office (see footnote 11).

³ This declaration was issued in May 2016, in a private first-hand conversation with Roberto Di Bella, President of the small Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria since September 15, 2011.

Where? In a chamber of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, a populous metropolitan city of the southern Italian region called Calabria, rich in forests, ocean, and mafia.⁴

Who? A distressed mother; an innocent child already on a bad path; a judge who, in the name of the law, is obliged to help this child escape from the 'Ndrangheta.⁵

What are we talking about? Of the poor upbringing imparted to children by their 'Ndrangheta families and of the necessity, on the part of the State, to guarantee these children a means of removal and redemption before they become indoctrinated and can no longer escape from the criminal vortex in which they had the misfortune to be born.

How? By intervening on the fine margin that exists between the rights of children (set forth in the UN *Declaration on the Rights of the Child*) and the child's right to family, and by adopting temporary civil proceedings for revocation or limitation of parental rights if there is a real risk to the physical or psychological integrity of the minor due to the mafia method of childrearing. An example would be when a minor is coerced by adult contacts into the illegal affairs of their criminal alliances. The risk is even more formidable in the case of hatred and

⁴ See Alessandro Tarsia, *Perché la 'ndrangheta? Antropologia dei calabresi*, Gioiosa Marea (Messina), Pungitopo, 2015. In the pamphlet the author begins from the fact that Calabria is an impoverished region with a disastrous level of unemployment, tax evasion and other negative factors, and which, simultaneously, is the homeland of one of the most powerful, extensive and dangerous criminal organizations in the world, equipped with wealthy, heavily armed, and violent gangs operating on almost every continent. Tarsia investigates the (possible) relationship between Calabrian popular culture and that peculiar type of mafia which is the 'Ndrangheta.

⁵ The name of the Calabrian mob, also known as *Santa* and *Picciotteria*, which – following a historic judgment sanctioned by the Court of Appeals on June 17, 2016 – is now officially considered a unitary, tight-knit system, with a decision-making body at its summit and a territorial base, and no longer to be considered (as was done up to that date) a set of *monadic* gangs. On the nature and unity of the 'Ndrangheta we refer to the documents of the DIA (Antimafia Investigative Division): “It is in fact a structure with two different faces: one is modern, fluid and versatile, able to stay up to date and seize every opportunity for profit; the other is ancient, made of rules, hierarchies, practices, formulas, oaths, prayers and blood, which unites and strengthens the system. Based on this dichotomy – only outwardly contradictory – the 'Ndrangheta has solidified its path of affirmation and entrenchment. Its rapid rise now situates it among the most fearsome mafias on an international level. In this regard, the words expressed in the grounds of the judgment at first instance – summary judgment, of the trial *Crimine*: “The 'Ndrangheta, that same group which imports cocaine from South America and launders its considerable economic resources through the world financial markets, also has an essential underbelly of rituals and positions, hierarchies and relations founded in an ancestral subculture that stretches back in time, which the globalization of crime has not eliminated but which, most likely, constitutes the strength of that organization and its “added value”, (<http://direzioneeinvestigativaantimafia.interno.gov.it/semestrali/sem/2016/1sem2016.pdf>, p. 66).

murderous feuds between rival ‘*ndrine*, in which neither women nor children are spared.⁶

The children of the ‘Ndrangheta begin their criminal life very early: it is their only available life model. After childhood, the young *mafiosi* become criminals themselves within a larger system that has many features in common with totalitarianism. The ‘Ndrangheta is a mafia that does not conceive of anything beyond itself. It does not allow for comparisons or mediations. It is a dichotomous world based on strict oppositional qualities: us-them, good-bad, friend-enemy mafia-State, life-death. For those born into this world, it is very difficult to get out.

If you do, you are considered a rat, a traitor and, many times, you deserve death. Not because whoever kills you is evil – actually he feels quite justified – but because there was no other option. You didn’t get it that you can’t give up your membership in the Holy Family of the Mafia. The one that goes to Mass every Sunday.

And, to show off its own wealth and importance, the family finances processions, including the obsequious bow before the patron saint, celebrated right in front of their home. This is done in order to exhibit and perpetuate its own power, further legitimized by the use of wooden statues of the Madonna and Saints,⁷ in order to guarantee “publicity which the mafia can’t get enough of” (Gratteri).⁸ It is, however, a holy family where disobedience is forbidden. And if you do disobey?

⁶ See Rosella Marzullo, “Mafia Children: From Future to Past. Knowing Other Realities to Learn Freedom”, *Review of Social Studies (RoSS)* Vol.3, No.2, Autumn. 2016, <http://www.rossjournal.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/RoSS-Vol3-No2-2016-Marzullo-45-57.pdf>, pp. 45-57. On Calabrian feuds see Arcangelo Badolati, *Faide*, Cosenza, Klipper, 2008.

⁷ On the relationship between the mafia and the Church see Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso, *Acqua santissima. La chiesa e la ‘Ndrangheta. Storie di potere, silenzi e assoluzioni*, Milano, Mondadori, 2013.

⁸ Nicola Gratteri, from a speech delivered on April 4, 2014 in Reggio Emilia, on the occasion of the conference *Us Against the Mafias*. Nicola Gratteri, born in 1958 in Gerace, in the Locride (Calabria), currently one of the most noted magistrates of the District Antimafia Directive (DDA) which, within the organization of the Italian government, is the state prosecutorial agency at the twenty-six district courthouses of the Court of Appeals, to which is entrusted jurisdiction on trials relating to mafia crimes. The DDA is coordinated at the national level by the National Antimafia Directive (DNA), in its turn under the jurisdiction of the Attorney General of the Supreme Court of Cassation. On the front lines of the fight against the ‘Ndrangheta, he has been living under security escort since April 1989. On June 21, 2005, the ROS (Special Operations Squad of the *carabinieri*, or military police) discovered in the plains of the Gioia Tauro municipality an arsenal of weapons (a kilo of plastic explosive with detonator, rocket launchers, Kalashnikovs, hand grenades) that could have been used for an assassination attempt against him. In 2009 he became the Deputy Public Prosecutor at the Court of Reggio Calabria. On April 21, 2016 the CSM (Superior Council of Magistrates), in all haste and by a large majority, appointed him Public Prosecutor of Catanzaro. From 2023 he is Public Prosecutor in Naples. Gratteri is also an essay

All the worse for you. You will pay dearly. We've sent you many different warning signs from the time you were born. You should have listened to us... We've told you again and again. And we made sure you understood. We, and We alone, are your family. We give you membership, protection, legitimacy and power. Without us you would be nothing, a nobody. No one would pay you any respect or attention. No one would go anywhere near you. You would be just another poor loser who makes no money and even pays unfair taxes to the filthy State. But look at what we do for you. What you can become thanks to us. How everyone respects you and makes way for you. You are a big shot. But unfortunately you didn't listen to us. You wanted to take matters into your own hands. You dissociated from us and you betrayed us: filthy rat! Poor you... where did you plan to go? What did you plan to do? Didn't you understand that you can never be free of us? That either you are ours or you're finished, dead? What else could we do? You are the one who forced us to kill you. We are at peace with ourselves. Even the Madonna of the Polsi Sanctuary protects us, you know? We'll invoke her name and pray to her while we kill you. We are in the right. Not you. Look how shameless you are. Without any respect or honor.

This rapid sequence gives an idea of the logic of someone who does evil believing it to be good. You enter into the 'Ndrangheta by blood (the customary cut on the finger in the rite of initiation) and you leave by blood (violence and death). The seeds of this way of thinking are implanted in the individual from childhood by parents into whom, in turn, they were implanted by their own parents, and so on.⁹

writer and, along with Antonio Nicaso, is co-author of a large number of works, both scholarly and popular, on the Calabrian mafia.

⁹ For these and other aspects see the considerations in Girolamo Lo Verso (a cura di), *La mafia dentro. Psicologia e psicopatologia di un fondamentalismo*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1998 (2^a ed. 2002, IV ristampa 2012). This is the first book to tackle the topic of the mafia with a predominantly psychotherapeutic eye. The product of academics, legal practitioners on the frontline, and psychotherapists, it provides a framework for what is (and has been) the mafia psyche and the crisis which it is now undergoing, with historical phenomena such as children of mafia families who enter into psychotherapy and the globalization of organized crime. The various scholars explore the means through which one becomes a *made man*. This and other research notes how the subjects examined, in the vast majority of cases, come from either a familial environment or from a broader context of primary socialization in which the typical values of the mafia mindset are present and proposed as the only matrix of meaning for events (Flower, 1997; Lo Coco, 1998). An anthropo-psychological world in which the "masculine" values of strength, courage, honor, manhood, and coldness are exalted in opposition to the world of "cops", judges, and the forces of law and order in general. This representation of an internal good world formed by "respectable" men and an evil external one is a fundamental characteristic of mafia thought. To play the rat, the informer, with the cops (to reveal anything to the police) is the worst accusation in the mafia world. In this psyche, as in all fundamentalist systems (Lo Verso, 1998, loc. cit.), reign monolithic dichotomies of thought, with the world of attachments cleaved in a punitive manner. The authors utilize the expression 'fundamentalism' for all those processes of the construction of personal identity in which the individual *I* fully coincides with the suprapersonal and transpersonal *Us*. The subject cannot be *different*, other, from the world that conceived him psychically (Napoletani, 1987). In fundamentalist systems the psychic identity can be linked to suprapersonal structures –

The pedagogy of dishonor is a socio-cultural instrument for raising generations of individuals subjected to the will of an authority construed as almighty and unquestionable, similar to that experienced by children with respect to their parents.

In the past three decades, the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria has conducted more than a hundred trials for mafia-related crimes, according to Article 416 bis of the current Italian Penal Code,¹⁰ and over fifty trials for homicide or attempted homicide, all of these against minors (14-18 years of age).

In 2017, the same court, assisted by the District Attorney's Office, Juvenile Division,¹¹ finds itself having to "try the children or siblings of those who had

Nation, Church, Party – and/or exist within a validation that does not allow for freedom of thought (e.g. the current homogenization of television and social networks). Phenomena such as religious wars, nationalism, racism, and inquisitions, are all psychologically founded on this notion.

¹⁰ The crime of mafia association, an offense autonomous from criminal association, was introduced into the Italian Penal Code by the September 13, 1982 law, n. 646 (called *Rognoni-La Torre* after the names of its proponents). As Article 416 bis, "Codice Penale Associazioni di tipo mafioso anche straniere" (Penal Code Associations with mafia and mafia-like organizations): "Whosoever takes part in a mafia association formed of three or more people, shall be punished with imprisonment for a period of ten to fifteen years. Those who promote, direct or organize the association are punished, for this crime alone, with imprisonment for a period of twelve to eighteen years. The association is considered to be mafia when those who belong to it avail themselves of the force of intimidation of their associative ties and the condition of subjugation and of *omertà* [silencing] that ensues in order to commit crimes, to acquire in a direct or indirect manner the management or control of economic activities, concessions, authorizations, contracts and public services, or to gain profits or unfair advantages for themselves or for others, in order to prevent or hinder the free exercise of voting or to procure votes for oneself or others on the occasion of elections. If the association is considered armed, imprisonment increases from twelve to twenty years in the cases provided for in the first subparagraph and from fifteen to twenty-six years in the cases provided for in the second subparagraph. The association shall be deemed to be armed when the participants have at their disposal, for the achievement of the association's objectives, weapons or explosive materials, even if concealed or kept in storage. If the economic activities which associates use to take or maintain control are financed in whole or in part with the price, the product, or the profit of crimes, the penalties laid down in the preceding paragraphs shall be increased by a third to half. With respect to the convicted person it is compulsory to confiscate items that served or were intended to commit the offense and items which constitute the price, product or which are intended for an offense. The provisions of this Article shall also apply to the *Camorra* [Neapolitan mafia], to the *Ndrangheta*, and to other associations, whether they be locally known as foreign, which by utilizing the force of intimidation of associative ties pursues objectives corresponding to those of a mafia sort" (*Penal Code*, Book 2, *On particular crimes*, Title V, *Offenses against the public order*, articles 414-421, article 416 bis. Emphasis mine).

¹¹ This is part of the Public Prosecutor's Office, an agency distinct and separate from the Court (even though it falls under the umbrella of the Judiciary). It prosecutes minors who are charged with a criminal offense and can require civil measures for the protection of minors. In criminal proceedings it has the task of bringing charges and prosecuting offenses. In civil proceedings, on the other hand, it requires the Court to enact civil measures in order to protect minors. Often these requests arise from Social Services reports. If Social Services discovers offenses against minors, it must alert the regular Public Prosecutor's Office about the criminal offense and the Juvenile Division in order to enact civil measures (e.g. removal from the family home or revocation of guardianship). It is a magistrate, not a judge, who heads the Public Prosecutor's Office. The

been prosecuted in the 90s and the early 2000s, all belonging to the well-established mafia families of the area”.¹²

These families are well known throughout Italy: Alvaro, Aquino, Cataldo, Condello, Cordì, Cutro, De Stefano, Ficara, Gallico, Grande Aracri, Macrì, Mancuso, Mazzaferro, Morabito, Nirta, Papalia, Pelle, Pesce, Piromalli, Romeo, Serraino, Strangio, Vottari, Zappia, etc. The crime logs¹³ are always full of their names as well as their places of origin: Africo, Bovalino, Capo Rizzuto, Gioia Tauro, Limbadi, Locri, Marina di Gioiosa Ionica, Platì, Reggio Calabria, Rosarno, San Luca, Siderno, Sinopoli, etc.¹⁴ All one needs is to browse the internet and click on any of these names to be bowled over by an avalanche of information on their criminal activities, which the State attempts to counteract with anti-mafia operations with suggestive titles (Fehida, Eclissi, Cosa Mia, Mandamento, etc.). Unfortunately, the counteractions are not sufficient.

This book discusses a new strategy proposed by an Italian magistrate to combat organized crime. It is a strategy that, for the sake of the protection of minors who are mafia children and by virtue of its innovative cultural perspective, can provide concrete contributions. The issue of the children of the ‘Ndrangheta – a mafia based on blood ties and, therefore, subject to transmission from parents to

magistrate’s position is partisan, albeit public and qualified. The Juvenile Prosecutor deals with offenses committed by minors and civil or administrative proceedings involving minors. The Public Prosecutor must always participate in juvenile civil proceedings, even when initiated by a private individual (<http://www.assistentisociali.org/minori/procura-della-repubblica.htm>). Specifically, in 2011-2020 the Juvenile Prosecutor’s Office of Reggio Calabria was composed of two magistrates: the Prosecutor, Dr. Giuseppina Latella, and the Deputy Prosecutor, Dr. Andrea Esposito.

¹² Roberto Di Bella, in his talk at the convention *Indottrinamento mafioso e responsabilità genitoriale: l’orientamento giurisprudenziale del Tribunale dei Minorenni di Reggio Calabria. Analisi e prospettive*, Palazzo Madama, Senato della Repubblica Italiana, Roma, 24 Novembre 2015 (see the recording produced on November 24, 2015: www.radioradicale.it). It should be noted that, here and elsewhere in the text, I cite from the typescript of his speech given to me by Di Bella himself (pp. 1-6).

¹³ See the July 4, 2017 article by Alessio Candito and Fabio Tonacci in the newspaper *La Repubblica* online, titled: “Criminalità organizzata. Colpo alla ‘ndrangheta: 116 arresti in Calabria. Video: il boss intercettato: ‘Lo Stato sono io’. Blitz con mille cc [Carabinieri], sgominate le cosche del reggino. Tutti gli affari, dai fondi UE alle assunzioni forestali.” Immediately following is the related article: “Il vescovo di Locri: ‘Qui pezzi di Chiesa a braccetto con la ‘ndrangheta’”, http://www.repubblica.it/index.html?refresh_ce. For the controversial relationship between the mafia and the Church, we refer to Gratteri and Nicaso, *Acqua santissima. La Chiesa e la ‘ndrangheta. Storie di potere, silenzi e assoluzioni*, cit., 2015

¹⁴ This covers the entire region of Calabria which today is divided into the Ionic, Tyrrhenian, and central districts. At one time, in the slang of the ‘Ndrangheta, the region was divided between the mountains, the plains, and the “cathedral”.

children – is crucial.¹⁵ Mafia children today are expected to be adult mafiosi tomorrow. The argument concerning families of fathers, mothers, and children, is so extremely delicate that, at first blush, it elicits an unquestionable NO, further entrenched by prejudices, misunderstandings, and exploitation by the media. But the children of the mafia, who are handled by the Court of Reggio Calabria, are not ‘normal’ children from families with ‘normal’ issues. Of the one hundred and fifty cases mentioned a few lines ago, many – now adults – were sentenced to do hard time according to Article 41 bis of the Penal Code;¹⁶ many were killed in the course of family feuds; many others have attained leadership positions in their ‘*ndrina*’.

Today the Court has tried adolescent murderers responsible for the killing of law enforcement officers; young criminals who deal drugs; kids who have threatened and committed extortion against local business owners. These activities were often performed on behalf of their parents, imprisoned under Article 41 bis. There are also cases of very young girls who run the household during the absence of relatives, friends and acquaintances, or who have been fully involved, sometimes as murderers, in feuds and mafia-related dynamics.

Let us look at some examples.¹⁷

One of the minors tried was sentenced to thirty years in prison for the double homicide of police officers Antonino Fava and Giuseppe Garofalo, which took

¹⁵ On this topic see the richly detailed work of nonfiction by Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso, *Fratelli di sangue. Storie, boss e affari della 'ndrangheta la mafia più potente del mondo*, Milano, Mondadori, 2008.

¹⁶ Article 41 bis (commonly called ‘hard time’) is part of the 1975 Law n. 354 on penitentiary treatment, amended by the Law of December 23, 2002, n. 279, published in the *Official Journal* n. 300 on December 23, 2002. The text reads: “In exceptional cases of revolt or other serious emergency situations, the minister of justice has the right to suspend within the institution, or in any part of it, the application of the normal rules of treatment of prisoners. The suspension must be justified by the need to restore order and security and for the length of time as is strictly necessary for the attainment of this goal. In the case of serious issues of order and public security, including at the request of the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Justice has also the right to suspend, in whole or in part, concerning prisoners or those interned for any of the crimes referred to in the first sentence of paragraph 1 of Article 4B, in relation to which there is some evidence to suggest the existence of links with a criminal, terrorist, or conspiratorial association, the application of the rules of treatment established under the present law as may arise in concrete opposition with the requirements of order and security. The suspension involves the restrictions necessary for the fulfilment of the abovementioned requirements and to prevent ties with the associations referred to in the previous sentence” (<http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/022791.htm>).

¹⁷ Please be advised that in this monograph, for reasons of protection laid down by Italian law, actual names, surnames, and the places of birth of minors in question as well as their parents are omitted (to be replaced by fictional initials and by [...] indicating the omissions).

place on January 18, 1994.¹⁸ Another minor, long reported on the list of the most dangerous fugitives in Italy compiled by the Ministry of the Interior, has been tried for six murders. Several minors were tried, following a Fehida operation, and sentenced for their involvement in the feud of San Luca (Calabria),¹⁹ which resulted in the massacre of Duisburg (Germany) on August 15, 2007, leaving six young victims dead including a boy of sixteen years.²⁰

All the children mentioned in this book are children, siblings, nephews, nieces, and cousins of the ‘ndranghetisti whose surnames appear among the historical families already listed, and they represent “the bitter confirmation that the ‘Ndrangheta is passed on” and is perpetuated through “the undisputed and persistent dominance of the same well-known ‘ndrine.”²¹ Di Bella, to whose

¹⁸ Joseph Garofalo and Antonino Fava (31 and 36 years), both married and fathers of two and three children, respectively, were killed in an ambush by a mafia commando on January 18, 1994 in Scilla (Reggio Calabria) while in their *Gazzella* (standard issue police vehicle) on duty with the patrol unit of the *Compagnia di Palmi* (Carabinieri) and in the process of stopping a suspicious vehicle. They were shot multiple times with rifle and Beretta M12 machine gun fire. Dedicated to their memory is the headquarters of the Carabinieri Police Academy of Reggio: the *Fava e Garofalo* barracks. Today, at the time of writing on July 27, 2017, the whole of the Italian press is reporting the arrest, twenty years later, of the second principal suspect (the first, Giuseppe Graviano, affiliated with the Sicilian *Cosa Nostra*, also convicted for the 1993 massacres in Milan, Florence and Rome and the murder of Don Puglisi which took place in Palermo on September 15, 1993, has been incarcerated [41 bis] since 1994) in the double homicide. This newest suspect is Rocco Santo Filippone, affiliated with the ‘Ndrangheta of Melicuccio, the head of his ‘*ndrina*, connected to the powerful Piromalli crime family of Gioia Tauro. He was arrested on July 26, 2017. This arrest results from a broad investigation by the District Attorney of Reggio Calabria into the alliance between mafia groups in the 1990s when in Italy, between the end of the first government following the corruption scandal known as *Tangentopoli* and the beginning of the Berlusconi era, the groups executed massacres and destabilizing acts in order to play a role in the overall restructuring of the balance of power. See Giovanni Bianconi and Carlo Macri, “Mafia e ‘ndrangheta unite dalle stragi: ‘Così lo Stato scenderà a patti.’ L’uccisione nel ’94 di due Carabinieri collegata agli attentati decisi da Cosa Nostra”, *Corriere della sera*, 27 luglio 2017, p. 18; Arrigo Fierro, “Arrivò Forza Italia, i boss ordinarono: basta stragi. Il Pubblico Ministero Lombardo: ‘Siciliani, calabresi, Camorra e Servizi Segreti deviati erano Cosa sola,’” *Il Fatto quotidiano*, 27 luglio 2017, p. 3.

¹⁹ ‘Feud’ (Italian ‘*faida*’): a primitive, violent form of private justice that characterizes and distinguishes the ‘Ndrangheta from all other criminal associations active in Europe.

²⁰ The massacre of Duisburg, known as the “*strage di Ferragosto*”, which took place in Duisburg in front of the Italian restaurant-pizzeria *Da Bruno*, was carried out by exponents of the ‘Ndrangheta. The following is the list of persons killed (note the young age of all the victims): Tommaso Venturi, 18 years, from Corigliano Calabro (district of Cosenza); Francesco Giorgi, 16 years, from San Luca (district of Reggio Calabria); Francesco Pergola, 22 years, from Siderno (district of Reggio Calabria); Marco Pergola, 20 years, from Siderno (district of Reggio Calabria); Marco Marble, 25 years, from San Luca (district of Reggio Calabria); Sebastiano Strangio, 39 years, from San Luca (district of Reggio Calabria), chef and owner of the restaurant, member of the Pelle-Vottari ‘*ndrina* and not of the Strangio ‘*ndrina*, despite his last name (see “Duisburg, la strage di Ferragosto. Sei italiani vittime della faida di San Luca”, 15 Agosto 2007, www.repubblica.it).

²¹ Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Italian Republic Senate, cit., 2015, p. 1.

revolutionary legal action this book is dedicated, explains that the episodes concerning ‘Ndrangheta minors are always

extremely serious and practically unknown to the general public, [and] which, had they occurred elsewhere, would certainly have aroused greater amounts of alarm and attention. The statistical and historical data reported here is also based on my professional experience of more than twenty-five years in the juvenile court system, sixteen of which were spent at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria.²²

With regard to the marginalization of the ‘Ndrangheta, a very powerful mafia devoted to omertà and to non-visibility,²³ it is useful to recall that the abovementioned case concerning the massacre of Duisburg presents an important characteristic: it is the first recent criminal act committed by the Calabrian mafia to have achieved widespread coverage in the international press, not only for its (apparent) senselessness and terrible brutality,²⁴ but also because it was committed “away from home”, beyond the borders of Calabria and of Italy.²⁵

This fact provides the opportunity for this book to reach a wider English-speaking audience: because mafias are a phenomenon of international scope and global distribution. The writer Roberto Saviano has rightly pointed out that the existence of the Sicilian-American mob, called Cosa Nostra, has become known worldwide (albeit in a fictional-fantasy version) thanks to the success of the film by Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather* (1972), while an absolute silence at the international level surrounds the other mafia groups. And if it is true that the global spotlight has finally been cast on the existence of the Neapolitan camorra,

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ On the nature of the ‘Ndrangheta and on its rules and codes see Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso, *Dire e non dire. I dieci comandamenti della ‘ndrangheta nelle parole degli affiliati*, Milano, Mondadori, 2012. This long essay is based on a vast amount of documentary sources (intercepted conversations, “pizzini” [small slips of paper used to send messages from prison], records of judicial rulings, and sentence hearings) from 1860 to today (a reminder to non-Italian readers that the political unification of Italy dates back to 1861). According to the golden rule of mafia *omertà*: “The less words you say the better, in any situation” (Ivi, p. 170).

²⁴ To fully understand the nature of the mafia world, it is useful to reflect on the words of Falcone, which are valid for all the mafia organizations: “Participation in a violent act generally responds to a strict logic [...]. I stress this concept because only by addressing the mafia for what it really is – a serious and perfectly organized criminal association – will we be able to combat it. The most repugnant reprisals, those that leave a foul taste and appear unnecessarily cruel to the average citizen, are never performed lightly, but only through a sense of duty” (Giovanni Falcone in collaboration with Marcelle Padovani, *Cose di Cosa Nostra*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1991, p. 32). Magistrate Falcone (class of 1939) was assassinated on May 23, 1992, together with his wife Francesca Morvillo and three body guards (Antonio Montinaro, Rocco Di Cillo and Vito Schifani), in the massacre of Capaci, in Sicily, by the *Cosa Nostra*.

²⁵ One should remember that the only previous acts of the ‘Ndrangheta to have made global news were: the July 10, 1973 kidnapping of John Paul Getty III; and the September 29, 1994 murder of Nicholas Green (see footnote 221).

in the wake of the global success of Saviano's book *Gomorra* (2006) and the film of the same title by Matteo Garrone (2008), it is equally true that today, in the age of the internet, the most powerful mafia is the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta. The undisputed leader of European cocaine trafficking has conquered the international limelight – after a long period in shadow and silence – in the wake of the events of Duisburg.²⁶

It is evident that the problem of the children of 'Ndrangheta families is one of ongoing, high risk of individual (for the children themselves) and social (for civil society) peril, and can no longer be ignored, downplayed, or silenced, but must be tackled purposefully by the Italian government and the European Union through a necessary synergy in pursuing policies shared among institutions and competent authorities: the judiciary, social services, the school, and the family.

The relationship between parents and children in the world of the 'Ndrangheta is complex and contradictory. Much has been written about it and much more will be written in the future. However, calling to mind the most difficult and thorny cases, the great “jumble of the human heart” (Manzoni) is always striking. One may recall the mafiosi sentenced to 41 bis for heinous crimes who, empowered by their parenthood which they perceive as absolute at any cost, express hatred and resentment against the Court responsible for removing children from their family

²⁶ On the global problem of cocaine trafficking in the hands of the mafia, see the recent investigative novel by Roberto Saviano, *Zero Zero Zero* (Milano, Feltrinelli, 2013); English translation edited by Virginia Jewiss, *Zero Zero Zero. Look at Cocaine and All You See Is Powder. Look Through Cocaine and You See the World* (London, Penguin Random House, 2015). More rigorous and based on accurate and unprecedented field research is the work of Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso, *Oro bianco. Storie di uomini, traffici e denaro dall'impero della cocaina* (Milano, Mondadori, 2015). The book tells the story of the immense power of cocaine trafficking starting from its origins in the fields of South America, where the plant grows and is collected by indigent *indios*. According to the estimates of the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) in 2012, 243 million people worldwide between 15 and 64 years of age have consumed an illegal substance at least once. Among these, cocaine is the most in-demand and highest-selling drug of the 'Ndrangheta. For the Calabrian mob bosses, 'snow' is profit, gain, a steady stream of liquid assets – indeed, “drugs equal money laundering” (Falcone, 1991, loc. cit., p. 138) – that overturns classical economic thought, according to which crime does not ‘produce’ because it instead destroys, and it does not generate wealth. But, paradoxically, the poorest regions (including Calabria) are those with the highest rate of extremely wealthy and powerful *mafiosi* (on this point see Alessandro Tarsia, *Perché la 'ndrangheta*, cit., 2015). In the book the co-authors reconstruct the global cocaine trafficking route in a journey leading from Colombia to Calabria, following the stages of a global business that enriches drug traffickers, impoverishes and kills drug addicts, contaminates the banking system, and corrupts the ruling classes. They travelled to Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, the United States, Africa and Australia. And in Europe, they visited Germany, Austria, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Belgium, and Holland, in order to reconstruct the air, sea and land routes along which cocaine passes from the producer to the consumer. This is a book encompassing a veritable global scourge.

home,²⁷ thus showing a bond and a deep affection for their own offspring. These are the same individuals who – in their dedication to one of the most important activities of the 'Ndrangheta, i.e. cocaine trafficking, with a supply chain stemming from the South American fields where armies of malnourished children are exploited – have never shown compassion for those children of indigent and desperate parents on the other side of the globe. Crucial in this regard is the testimony of mafiologue Antonio Nicaso from the notebook of his 2015 journey, which he undertook with Nicola Gratteri along the cocaine trafficking route overseen by the 'Ndrangheta. This journey allowed him to visit the coca plantations in Colombia and the laboratories where the 'base paste' is obtained from the leaf of the plant.²⁸

Forty-three percent of the desplazada population in Colombia is under fifteen years of age. They are the primary victims of a conflict that has bloodied Colombia for over fifty years. Children are also used by narcos in the laboratories installed in the Colombian jungle where cocaine is produced. Barefoot children stomp on the coca leaves together with various chemical precursors in order to make a mash, the so-called 'coca paste.'²⁹

All in the name of coca (or other illegal dealings), from the chemically contaminated children of South America, to the children of rival Calabrian gangs, killed and made victims of feuds and violence, to their own children who are given no choice but to become mafiosi, one can imagine the extent of the problems concerning childhood and adolescence in the mafia world, and in the 'Ndrangheta in particular.

Considering the geographical and cultural territories in which the 'Ndrangheta thrives, survival and prosperity are not simple tasks. The present essay aims to describe a particular reality in order to see up close how we might present significant opposition to mafia culture. The modes in which this may occur are the corollary of Judge Giovanni Falcone's thesis, according to which, when battling the mafia:

²⁷ As one may read in their letters from prison to the professionals (lawyers, psychologists) officially responsible for assisting them. In order to protect the minors involved, these correspondences shall remain confidential.

²⁸ In a private conversation (from June 20, 2017) with the author, Nicaso did not seem optimistic about substantial changes in the short term with regard to cocaine trafficking in Colombia, despite the official government reconciliation with the FARC and the Nobel Peace Prize awarded by the Royal Academy of Stockholm to the Colombian President Manuel Santos in October 2016.

²⁹ Nicaso, in a private correspondence with the author, from July 6, 2017. Bear in mind that the "chemical precursors" include: kerosene, cement, ether, and acetone. It is not difficult to imagine the resulting pathologies suffered, against their will, by the children of the *Indios*.

Laws do not serve if they are not supported by a strong and clear political will, if they cannot function for lack of adequate systems and especially if these systems are not equipped with professionally qualified personnel.³⁰

These are words that embody the substance of the project, with its proactive title Free to Choose,³¹ underlying the operation of “cultural infiltration” promoted by Di Bella, to which I shall return shortly. What we are speaking of is a revolutionary antiphon to the ‘Ndrangheta in the name of culture. In order to counteract with long-term effectiveness the mafia subculture which – constructed around a do-it-yourself, self-legitimizing, false and errant mythology³² – deceives itself and others, conquering them with the fear of that consensus necessary to ensure power through the perpetuation of customs, principles, and rituals manufactured on the basis of a pharisaical concept of honor. In truth it is dishonor, rather, which has never respected or spared women, mothers, and children.³³

2. The Path

2.1 First portrait. The case of V. (baby-collaborator)

... “The ‘Ndrangheta” is “the mafia! ... A mafioso is a drug dealer, he shoots.” The speaker shows that he is well aware that his own parent “took part as a member of the *cosca* of [...]” together with other associates, of whom he “demonstrated knowledge even of their legal history, making reference to the operations which had led to their arrest.” Moreover, in the ruling’s transcript we read that the speaker:

1) reported having seen on multiple occasions weapons (“pistols and a rifle”) and “drugs in the car wash office” of his father, specifying that it was “powdery stuff ... white”;

2) stated how his father “did whatever the *cosca* needed, even without orders” and was “the boss’s right hand man”, named N.C.;

³⁰ Giovanni Falcone, cit., 1991, p. 154.

³¹ The journalist Angela Iantosca was the first in Italy to dedicate a book to this topic. Its investigation contains information up to the year 2014: *Bambini a metà. I figli della ‘ndrangheta*, Roma, Perrone, 2015.

³² In this respect see the fundamental text of Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK), 1983.

³³ On this point see Giuliana Adamo and Antonio Nicaso, “Contro la pedagogia del disonore”, in *L'intervento con gli adolescenti devianti. Teorie e strumenti*, a cura di Maria Claudia Biscione e Marco Pingitore, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2015, pp. 209-230.

3) recounted having witnessed the buying and selling of drugs on various occasions, in particular of “160 kg of marijuana that had to go ... to the members of [...]” and that “his [i.e. those under his father’s command] did nothing without being ordered, they wouldn’t even lift a finger”, to underline the absolute prominent role his parent played in the organization, again indicating how this parent could decide to do “damage or sell drugs without having to justify himself to anyone.”

The minor V. then told of various trips with his father “for illegal activities” and in particular of one “to Naples”, with two automobiles, using a relay system for “transporting drugs ... contained in a big package ... because they broke it into sections ... they didn’t put it all together” and having seen them hide it “in the engine ... around the belts, the gaskets.”

He told, finally, about once having seen his father (“about a year ago”) converse with such D.F. as “they were having to bring a load of drugs into the port of [...] and there on his computer screen” – which was found inside the car wash office – “was the map of the port” ... and that from the conversation he realized that they had to “get the ship into port without any checks.”³⁴

The person who offered these declarations to the regular Public Ministry, on Friday August 7 and Friday September 9, 2015, was V., eleven years old, the youngest collaborator in the history of the mafia. The child speaks in the context of the Eclissi trial, where among the defendants was his father, arrested nearly a year before and currently doing hard time (41 bis) due to a conviction for the offense of mafia association according to Article 416 bis.

Why did a “millennial”, eleven years of age – Calabrian, Italian, European – find himself in front of a District Attorney in 2015, talking about weapons, the organization of drug trafficking, and illegal commercial strategies at the Port of Gioia Tauro, telling how they filled containers with white powder, how the cocaine trafficking routes were studied and selected to avoid checks, recalling violence and abuse?³⁵

³⁴ Decree N. 32/15 R.G. Vol. Lega., 29.9.2015, Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, pp. 9, p. 3-4. Meeting in council: President Roberto Di Bella, Reporting Judge Sebastiano Finocchiaro, honorary judges Vittorio Blasa and Francesca Praticò. Italics, bold and underlined are original to the judicial acts, here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated.

³⁵ The members of a mafia association make regular use of violence and intimidation, which is the quickest and easiest way to impose itself on the community, to instill fear and respect and, therefore, to secure the consent which they need to maintain power. “The mafiosi do and will continue to do so as long as the mafia exists. In the course of my career I have seen many people dying of hunger suddenly become wealthy entrepreneurs. But I’ve never seen anyone who has renounced affiliation or the use of mafia methods. *And the same applies to their children.* This is a truth which shows just how difficult is the fight against the mafia: if it were banditry or urban gangsterism, things would be much simpler” (Falcone, 1991, cit., p. 131. Emphasis mine).

This book tells of mafia children, of lives they live, of all that is denied to them, of what they could do if they could be free to choose.

The reason why freedom of choice is vital for these mafia children – indoctrinated and brainwashed from birth by their own parents and by their home environment, deprived of their childhood and adolescence, robbed of their rights as children, forced into a life of violence and illegality – we read here below in the letter that a young Calabrian, now twenty-one years old (born in 1996), the son of an ‘Ndrangheta boss, wrote in 2014 to Ferruccio de Bortoli, then director of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.³⁶

2.2 Second Portrait. The case of R.C.

Dear Director, I am a Calabrian from Locri and my name is R.C. Many have written about me, even if they never used my actual name. It so happened that they wrote things that are incorrect: it was not their story, it's mine. Now I have decided to tell it. On March 7, 2011, I was arrested by the Carabinieri of Locri for theft and damage to a car belonging to the Railway Police. In July I was fully acquitted, but in the meantime I was arrested again for a brawl. This is how it all began. The Court of Reggio decided to move me away from Locri for one year, so that I could leave certain experiences behind me. So started my journey. I arrived in Sicily. At the beginning it was not easy at all, I was alone and far from home. Everything changed when they moved me to Messina where I began to see one of the volunteers of Addiopizzo Messina:³⁷ a psychologist, a guy who has helped me to

³⁶ Riccardo Cordì, in a letter entitled “Il figlio del boss che sceglie lo Stato”, published on the front page of *Corriere della Sera*, dated May 8, 2014. The case of Riccardo attracted the attention of the international press; see “The big story. Italy fights mafia with new strategy: banish sons”, Frances D’Emilio, Sep. 28, 2014, AM EDT.

³⁷ The “Addiopizzo” Messina Committee is a non-profit association whose chief priority is the promotion of a virtuous economy, free from ‘pizzo’ [the bribe fee which the mafia extorts from the civilian population] and from the influence of mafia-type criminal organizations. To this end, the association works from the bottom up through the promotion of “Critical Consumption Addiopizzo” and other strategies of non-violent action, aimed at supporting Sicilian citizens and business owners and promoting a culture of legality, solidarity and environmental awareness. The following submitted proposal, shared with the judicial authorities of Catanzaro and Reggio Calabria, is comprised of the numerous activities of social solidarity conducted by the Association and responds pragmatically to the purposes set out in its statutes, in particular “in the promotion and development of strategies of non-violent struggle against mafia rule [...] and in the planning and support of initiatives, activities and interventions that are designed to promote the birth of an anti-mafia movement.” In working toward this end, on May 13, 2013, the Association signed an Operational Protocol with the Office of Social Services for Juveniles in Messina (Department of Juvenile Justice) with the objective of promoting an integrated operation in the design and/or implementation of individualized projects for minors entering the criminal justice system. Said protocol was made immediately operational in order to take charge of some children of ‘Ndrangheta families subject to the provisions issued by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria

discover a new life. In the period that I spent in Messina I have done things, met people, I lived in places that I had never seen before. One morning, together with that guy, I went to the sea. From there I saw Calabria, my land. But this time I saw it from another perspective: I observed it from another place, but it was me who was truly different. I decided that my life had to change. I want to return to Locri, but I do not want to have any more problems with the law. Not only because it's not good for me, but also because I want to live in peace. I want to stay clean. Before having this experience, I thought that the State doesn't care at all about people. The State was what took you away from home. And you did not know if you would return and when you would return. In these months I have known a different State, not one that wanted to change me at all costs but one that for once tried to understand who I really was. And who am I really? An eighteen-year-old boy, a boy like any other. I was very young when my father was killed, I saw my brothers go to jail. I would like a different future for myself. This does not mean that I renounce my family. They will always be my brothers. Calabria will always be my land. It's only that I would like to be a kid like other kids. Before me now there is only one road that I must choose. The State that before was so distant is giving me different possibilities. Now I can choose whatever I want to do. I can choose which job I want to do, which city to live in. I can reach for the sky. I do not know if I will get there, but I will try. Certainly something has changed. I made it, I can do it. And it's not just me. There are many kids like me who need the State in this way. They don't believe it exists. I do know and I am writing this letter so that others will know as well. It's still an uphill road. But it is not true that happy endings are only an illusion. They can be a reality.

These are the words of a mafia child belonging to one of the most powerful 'Ndrangheta families from the area around Reggio. The intervention of the juvenile authorities in Reggio has guaranteed him a new possibility at life, which spurred him to talk about his new education and training (*Bildung*). And thanks to this education, he came to recognize that the State is not an enemy to be fought,³⁸

which, in order to try to “*give them at least a chance to get to know a different way of living and thinking [...] and to remove them from an otherwise inevitable fate within the mafia*”, has experimented with removing them from their own immediate family (in situations of established psycho-physical injury), with the assistance of Juvenile Social Services authorities from outside the region of Calabria. On the ‘pizzo’ see Diego Gambetta, *La mafia siciliana. Un’industria della protezione privata*, Torino, Einaudi, I ed. 1994.

³⁸ In this regard I cite the admission of Antonino Belnome: “They teach you to hate the State, the forces of law and order, the police [...]. They drill it into your head that they [the cops] are rotten and dishonest, and you are the one who is in the right” (Gratteri and Nicaso, *Dire e non dire*, cit., 2012, p. 20). Belnome is an ‘ndrangheta member with several murders on his record. His statement is contained in the *Memorial* speech delivered to the magistrates of the District Antimafia Directive (DDA) of Milan in 2011. With regard to the visceral aversion which *mafiosi* hold against representatives of the State, Falcone states (and this assertion he made regarding Cosa Nostra also applies to the ‘Ndrangheta): “The bloodiest insult for a man of honor consists in sticking him with the appellative of ‘cop’ or ‘rat’” (Falcone, 1991, cit., p. 100).

that the justice system outside the home is not something alien to be abolished, that it is not true that his destiny lies only in the hands of his parents and the made men of his neighborhood,³⁹ that alternatives do exist. The young man acknowledges that the State is made up of real flesh-and-blood people, not of mere figures and bogeymen to denigrate and spray with buckshot as he was taught by his family;⁴⁰ and that one can converse constructively, not just clash destructively.⁴¹ Hope of another possible life emerges in a boy who from birth

³⁹ On July 4, 2017, in reference to the massive operation of security forces against the ‘Ndrangheta (see footnote 13), the newspaper *Il Fatto quotidiano* ran an article by Lucio Musolino. The title was: “‘Ndrangheta. Nelle carte dell’operazione Mandamento Jonico il cuore delle cosche: dagli appalti ai desideri degli studenti” [The ‘Ndrangheta. In the case of the Mandamento Jonico operation, the heart of the syndicates: from contracts to the desires of the students]. The subtitle read “C’è anche la lettera di un 15enne che scrive al boss in carcere tra le 3mila pagine dell’ordinanza che ha portato all’arresto di 116 persone. Gli interessi delle cosche si spingono a qualsiasi appalto, persino il tribunale di Locri, gli ostelli della Gioventù, i contributi pubblici. E si scoprono le dinamiche interne per *processare e punire* chi trasgredisce il codice d’onore interno” [There is also the letter of a 15-year-old who wrote to the boss in prison, among the 3000 pages of the injunction, which led to the arrest of 116 people. The interests of the syndicates lead to contracts everywhere, even with the court of Locri, youth hostels, and public funding. And you will discover the internal dynamics to *prosecute and punish* those who violate the Code of Honor here inside]. This is a passage from the article, based on papers seized from the mafia that place us right in the heart of the problem treated in this book: “Hello my dearest, how is it going? I hope all is well. I am writing this letter [...]. The main reason is that I signed [*omissis*] that *I would like to make myself available for You and Your Family.*” These words are taken from a letter written by a fifteen-year-old boy and delivered to Alessandra Cataldo, the twenty-two-year-old daughter of boss Antonio Cataldo, known by the nickname ‘Pappuzzedda’ [ladybird], so that she could pass it on to her father in prison (www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/07/04/ndrangheta. Emphasis mine).

⁴⁰ On the myth of belonging to crime families which guarantees social status, respect, and a life in the highest ranks – an idea that holds enormous fascination and attraction for the minors described in this book – we cite the words of Gratteri and Nicaso: “These are surnames that locals pronounce with reverence and respect, and also with fear to put their noses where they don’t belong. These are bosses who enjoy social status, whom you see hobnobbing with politicians and professionals, who befriend them, negotiate with them, make deals with them. They see themselves as men of honor, different from all the others, those they think of as ‘losers, suckers, people without balls who make do with a thousand euros a month, without any dignity, without any joy’” (cit., 2012, p. 20; the quotation is taken from Claudio Antonelli and Gianluigi Nuzzi, *Metastasi. Sangue, soldi e politica tra Nord e Sud. La nuova ‘ndrangheta nella confessione di un pentito*, Milano, Chiarelettere, 2010, p. 27). And, the two co-authors continue: “Even more explicit, during an interview with the members of the family in the Palmi prison, Francesco Pesce describes the *others*, the ‘cops’: “They are zero... mixed with nothing” (*ibidem*; the source of the quote is an intercepted conversation on March 6, 2006, in the course of the operation *All Inside*).

⁴¹ On this point see the report by all the Italian newspapers on July 4, 2017 (see footnotes 13 and 39), including *Il Fatto quotidiano* with another article by Lucio Masolino, titled: “‘Ndrangheta, maxi-blitz in Calabria: 116 arresti. Il nipote di *u Tiradrittu* intercettato: ‘Lo Stato sono io, qua’” [‘Ndrangheta, huge operation in Calabria: 116 arrested. The nephew of *u Tiradrittu* in a tapped call: “I am the State, right here.”] The article is subtitled: “Retata nella Locride decapita 23 clan, comprese le cosche Pelle, Ficara-Latella, Morabito, Alvaro. I Carabinieri hanno scoperto non solo nuove cariche e strutture, ma anche veri e propri ‘tribunali’ per chi violava le regole del sodalizio” [The roundup in Locride decapitates 23 clans, including the Pelle, Ficara-Latella, Morabito, and Alvaro syndicates. The Carabinieri have discovered not only new caches and facilities, but also actual ‘courts’ for those who break the rules of the association]. To which follows the first paragraph of article: “‘*I am the State, right here, Pé... Controls... The mafia, the original mafia,*

was denied the responsible and autonomous development of his own individuality with the acquisition of an awareness of his own free will.

2.3 Free to Choose

This is a positive outcome of the measures adopted, for the first time in Italy in the history of the mafia, by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria in collaboration with the a Juvenile District Attorney, public defenders and Social Services.⁴² Since March 2012, following the horrific act bloodshed concerning Maria Concetta ‘Cetta’ Cacciola to which I shall return later, the Court adopted a completely new series of measures for the protection of minors of the mafia.⁴³ Parallel to judicial action, since September 2012 the Court has initiated the first steps for filling a serious institutional weakness with the creation of a network of acceptance and support for minors who are recipients of the measures. The purpose was to accord the implementation of personalized avenues of rehabilitation, support and social reintegration. The measures adopted led on March 21, 2013, to the Memorandum of Understanding “Free to Choose”, signed by the judicial authorities of the Province.⁴⁴ In the meantime, starting from prior

not the one in decline.’ Speaking is Giuseppe ‘Ringo’ Morabito, nephew of the Africo boss, Peppe Morabito, known as ‘Tiradritto’ [*u Tiradrittu* in the Calabrian dialect]. The interception is included in a detention order that brought in a huge haul tonight in Locride, in the province of Reggio Calabria. At the request of the DDA, the Carabinieri of ROS have arrested 116 persons accused of mafia association, extortion, illegal transport and possession of arms, fraudulent transfer of assets, fraud and other offenses, all aggravated by the aim of assisting the ‘Ndrangheta” (www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/07/04/ndrangheta. Emphasis mine).

⁴² In the field of social services, skills are entrusted to the municipalities that are the privileged interlocutors of the judicial authorities in various areas. The relationships were regulated by Art. 23, Paragraph 1, Letter C of D.P.R. 616/77 and by Art. 14, Paragraph 2 L.1085/62, for civil and administrative departments and by Presidential Decree 448/88 for the criminal justice system. In the civil sphere relationships of collaboration which the services maintain with the judicial authorities in the matter of juveniles in need of protection are of utmost importance (L.149/2001 and Book I of the Civil Code). The field of criminal law instead emphasizes the general criterion of Art. 6 of the DPR 448/88 (Code of Juvenile Criminal Proceedings) where it states that: “In every state and level of the process the judicial authority avails itself of the assistance services imposed by local agencies.” Of course, the management of quite complex and delicate situations relating to minors presupposes a proper relationship of collaboration between the Municipalities, individuals or associations, those appointed to the functions of protecting minors, and the juvenile judicial authorities, but also of the latter with the educational agencies and healthcare organizations which can collaborate with the justice system, if called to do so. Relationships of these workers with the judicial authorities are characterized by collaborations in the context of the technical and professional autonomy of the latter, regulated by the agencies on which they depend (*ibidem*).

⁴³ Here we refer to the case concerning the minors of Maria Concetta Cacciola; see Decree n. 83/12 R.V.G. of March 6, 2012.

⁴⁴ The Memorandum of Understanding, signed on March 21, 2013, “between the Judicial Offices of the District Appellate Court of Reggio Calabria (Reggio, Palmi, Locri) to agree upon operative

experiments with positive role models through the collaboration of the volunteer anti-mafia associations Free Calabria⁴⁵ and Addiopizzo Messina, in February 2014 the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria had submitted a proposed project, also titled Free to Choose, to the Department of Juvenile Justice. It is a comprehensive project whose aim is to initiate, with funding from the European Union, a systematic plan of action with respect to children from ‘Ndrangheta families, ensuring the implementation of that vast support network of judicial provisions in order to offer these children concrete cultural, training, and job opportunities. As Di Bella writes:

In substance, the project foresees the establishment of specialized educational teams; that is, of educational pools [...] to be formed in a targeted manner in relation to the unique needs of these children, with the presence of a tutor and a psychologist with specific experience in the field, there to accompany these young people each step along the way. It is envisioned as a specialized network – also formed by families, homes and community organizations prepared ad hoc – that will help the children to overcome the initial difficulties linked to their removal and, at the same time, is able to help them recognize their greatest needs, which had been oppressed by mafia ideology and upbringing.⁴⁶

On July 1, 2017, five years from the beginning of this journey, the government accepted the request of Di Bella and, in the Prefecture of Reggio Calabria, an

modes, coordination, and communication in cases of: 1) proceedings relating to sexual abuse or abuse leading to the injury of minors; 2) criminal proceedings relating to offenses committed in collaboration by subjects who are minors and adults; 3) civil proceedings for the protection of children of suspects/defendants/those convicted of offenses referred to in Art.51 Paragraph 3B of the penal code and elsewhere; 4) civil proceedings relating to minors and to households subject to measures of protection” (available online at the official website of the Ministry of Justice, p. 18, <http://www.tribmin.reggiocalabria.giustizia.it>, p.1).

⁴⁵ We refer here to the Calabrian presidium *Libera. Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie*, established on March 25, 1995 by its founder and current president, Don Pio Luigi Ciotti, with the intent to urge civilians to join the fight against the mafia and promote legality and justice. Currently *Libera* is an organization of over 1,500 associations, groups, and schools, regionally engaged to build political-cultural and organizational synergies capable of spreading a culture of legality. Laws on the social use of assets confiscated from the mafia, education in democratically-based legality, the fight against corruption, anti-mafia training camps, employment and development initiatives, and anti-usury activities, are some of the concrete initiatives to which *Libera* is committed. *Libera* is recognized as an association for social promotion by the Ministry of Social Solidarity. In 2008 it was included by EURISPES among the Italian centers of excellence. The key points of the operation implemented by *Libera* are: democratic legality, social justice, peace, solidarity, environment, memorializing mafia victims and victims of any violence, not forgetting those who undertook to bring about justice; protesting, according to the principles of non-violence, the dissemination of illegality and mafia control of the region. Its motto is “ In order to change it is important to participate!”

⁴⁶ Roberto Di Bella, “Le potenzialità della Giustizia minorile nel contrasto ai sistemi criminali familiari: la tutela dei minori di ‘ndrangheta tra prassi giudiziaria e prospettive *de iure condendo*”, in *Rivista Interdisciplinare Minori e Giustizia*, n. 3, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2016, pp. 1-15, p. 2.

important agreement was signed between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Interior, and the Province of Calabria, in order to undertake the implementation on a national scale of the project *Free to choose*.⁴⁷ On this occasion Luciano Trovato, President of the Juvenile Court in Catanzaro, among the signatories of the agreement, recalled that the magistrates of Reggio, especially Di Bello, were

the first to have transformed into judicial measures the conviction that justice cannot stop at the doorstep of the home belonging to organized crime families.⁴⁸ In particular when, from the proceeding's pages, one sees how familial affectivity in reality helps to perpetuate the syndicate's control, transforming children into child-soldiers by indoctrinating them from an early age into the cult of bullying and weapons, of contempt for those who do not share the same values, a lack of respect for the law and its representatives, a rejection of scholastic education in favor of a criminal education, all coming to fruition with the commission of the first petty crimes.⁴⁹

The governmental agreement provides for the allocation of funds necessary to strengthen the network of acceptance for minors who are subject to the rulings of the Court of First Instance.⁵⁰ More specifically, it concerns the training and

⁴⁷ Nine of the signatories to the July 2017 agreement: Minister of Justice Andrea Orlando and Interior Minister Marco Minniti; the Presidents of the Juvenile Courts of Reggio Calabria and Catanzaro, Roberto Di Bella and Luciano Trovato, respectively; president of the Appellate Court of Reggio Calabria Luciano Gerardi and the delegate of the Appellate Court of Catanzaro (Luciano Trovato); president of the Province of Calabria Mario Oliverio; Public Prosecutor at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Giuseppina Latella and of Catanzaro, Rita Tartaglia. See the article by Anna Foti from July 1, 2017 (www.reggiotv.it/notizie/cronaca/53163/liberi-scegliere-cambiare-vita-sottoscritto-prefettura-accordo-minori-famiglie-mafiose).

⁴⁸ Remember that an important precedent to the action of the current court in Reggio is represented by a 2008 measure signed by then President Antonino *Nino* Mazzù, relative to the two minor children of a powerful crime family of Reggio Calabria. The decree entrusted the children exclusively to the mother (found to be exempt from her husband's criminal activity) and terminated the parental rights of the father (a *mafioso*, murderer, and fugitive, belonging to one of the most powerful families in the 'Ndrangheta); see the Juvenile Court of Reggio, Decree, October 21, 2008, n. 786; pp. 1-7). This ruling, however, had remained an isolated case, until Di Bello worked to systematize and make it the goal of his project.

⁴⁹ Extract from the speech by Luciano Trovato on July 1, 2017, in the Prefecture of Reggio Calabria, on the occasion of the signing of the governmental accord for the realization of the project *Free to choose*.

⁵⁰ Here I cite Article taken from the July 2017 document, p. 7, paragraph 4: "In particular, the said agreement is aimed at: guaranteeing children from organized crime families adequate safeguards for a regular upbringing, and ensuring the satisfaction of their needs and requirements typical of adolescence, through the promotion of the values of legality and the enhancement of the specific potential, inclinations, and resources of minors and young adults; developing an experimental program for the prevention of social marginalization through educational opportunities, work, and recreational activities; enhancing the creative potential, communication skills, and the sense of identity, responsibility, and legality of minors and young adults subjected to rulings by the juvenile judicial authorities and who find themselves in situations of social and emotional hardship, through the creation of activities and the presentation of projects, even of an experimental nature; creating, with the collaboration of penitentiaries, of the U.S.S.M. (Office of

remuneration of specialized personnel (social workers, psychologists, foster families), with the creation of valid offers of employment for young people in difficulty. The signatures of the government representatives sanctioned an important change in direction for Di Bella's project, ensuring the progression from the original provincial level – which required Di Bella's involvement for its implementation and was set to expire on September 15, 2019, upon reaching the end of its mandate – to a regional institutional practice that will be extended to the national level. It represents a decisive step, in the hope (and an inspiration for the writing of these pages) that in the not-too-distant future the lines of communication between the different judicial offices of the Italian peninsula will be normalized by the law and will finally become a European directive.⁵¹

What is this protocol?

Free to choose is dedicated to ensuring the safety of minors, protecting their normal development and upbringing, offering them the possibility of experiencing cultural alternatives in order to avoid their inevitable indoctrination into crime. The protocol represents a fundamental step in the strategy of the Court of Reggio and, for the first time, requires the application of existing laws for the protection of minors of mafia families. Namely, this legislation relates to the limitation, suspension or revocation of parental rights in the case of parents objectively unable to care for and adequately fulfill their duties and obligations with respect to their own children for various reasons (serious and recurrent addiction, imprisonment for criminal offenses, et talia similia).⁵² Its novelty lies in its groundbreaking and courageous application in the area of inappropriate family

Juvenile Social Services), and of other offices of criminal enforcement, actions aimed at the reintegration of minors who are beneficiaries of the project by offering activities and programs, intended to include the birth family, that support actions already in effect; experimenting with restorative justice interventions and penal mediation involving, where possible, the birth family as well.”

⁵¹ In accordance with procedure, the protocol must be converted into a bill following its rewriting by the Legislative Offices, to then be approved by the two branches of Parliament (Chamber and Senate).

⁵² In this respect it should be noted that “even today there remain in use, unaltered, the ‘old’ forms of the original repressive system devised by the criminal code of 1930, in the violation of the obligations of family assistance (art. 570 c.p.), the abuse of means of correction or discipline (art. 571 c.p.), and domestic abuse (art. 572 c.p.” (Pier Giorgio Gosso, former President of the chamber of the Court of Torino, *L'abuso sui minori e il processo penale*, p. 15, p. 3, www.regione.piemonte.it/polsoc/osservatorio/dwd/incontro/gosso.doc). Di Bella explains that the experience gained by handling cases of *mafia children* “strengthened the conviction within the offices of Reggio’s juvenile justice system that we need to censure the mafia models of upbringing in the same manner in which we intervene against other parents who are violent or abusive or who have problems with alcoholism or drug addiction” (Di Bella, *Le potenzialità della Giustizia minorile nel contrasto ai sistemi criminali familiari: la tutela dei minori di 'ndrangheta tra prassi giudiziaria e prospettive de iure condendo*, cit., 2016, p. 3.)

dynamics, in a mafia context such as can be found in Calabria, where the ‘Ndrangheta is not only a powerful and unscrupulous criminal organization, but above all a widespread cultural fixture, with strong popular support gained from a tradition of ignorance, terror, and silence. As he often repeats in his writings and public meetings, Nicola Gratteri, then Chief Prosecutor of Catanzaro, states: “without this support the Mafia would not exist.” The aim of the Court and of the Juvenile Prosecutor in Reggio Calabria is to temporarily remove children from ‘Ndrangheta families whose parents (one or both) are recognized as ‘mafiosi’ by Italian law, with the objective of providing a normal upbringing, separated from the influence of family structures, thus allowing them to freely choose the direction of their own lives.

The Free to choose protocol “represents a true precedent in the national arena for its innovative network strategy and the objectives it pursues”,⁵³ and it is necessary in order to compensate for the insufficiencies of a purely public network. The latter was unable to guarantee effective planned interventions by the Court which arrange for accompaniment, tutoring, psychological and educational assistance, integration, the logistical relocation of minors (often together with their mothers), into organizations and environments suitable for their new path to re-creation and re-form – and, most importantly, in places well removed from the original path of deviation. Therefore, it has become a priority to implement a plan for the strengthening of public resources and their integration with those of the private social sphere.

Free to choose was born out of a humanitarian and social crisis. What happens once the judiciary and the Court intervene, act, debate, decide and decree the fate of a minor living in grave family conditions? In fact, the effective action of the magistrates and judges can be said to be complete as soon as they issue their decrees and judgments. What then? Who takes care and protects the minors to whom those decrees and judgments are addressed? Who makes sure to accompany them along the next stages of their troubled adolescence? The answer should be: the State. But the question is not rhetorical, and the State is often absent, insufficient, if not indifferent. What does intervene, then, is the immense amount of wisdom, work, and experience of the volunteer corps: a social buffer and share capital representative of the most obscure part of the Italian nation.⁵⁴

⁵³ Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Senate, cit., 2015, p. 4.

⁵⁴ According to the last survey of the ISTAT (Italian Institute of Statistics), carried out in 2021, the volunteer corps and the so-called ‘third sector’ – the private institutions that produce goods and services for the public or collective interest, and not for profit – consists of 4, 616.915 million citizens. These individuals are Italians at least 14 years of age who performed voluntary work, defined as ‘activities performed free of charge and without any obligation,’ at least once a month. The majority of them – over 4 million people – volunteered within organizations (associations, committees, movements, informal groups); the remaining performed services directly for other

The need for an efficient synergy between the State and private society requires the empowerment of a multidisciplinary team working alongside the judiciary and the offices of Juvenile Social Services (a necessary but insufficient contribution provided by the State) to provide an array of valuable qualified psychologists, mediators, and educators: an indispensable contribution offered by volunteers. The volunteers of the associations Libera Calabria and Addiopizzo Messina, with their network of educational, relational, and job opportunities, are an integral part of the project. The recent seal of approval by the government underlines the recognition of a commitment, that of President Di Bello, to rescue young lives from a future of incarceration or death. This protocol represents a decisive step toward synergy between the State and various institutions,⁵⁵ a step which validates the legal procedure inaugurated by Di Bella in 2012,⁵⁶ despite many opinions to the contrary and many adverse reactions elicited from the outset, as is obvious from the words of Trovato:

Admittedly, time is not always a gentleman. In this case it was necessary to resist a contrary wind, to wait and not give up on our own convictions, and also necessary was the objective condition of exercising specialized jurisdiction in an office with legislative autonomy. The contrary wind: it blew, and it was not a mere breeze. Let us not forget that all the great Italian newspapers spread the notion that the Law, then limited to Reggio (but today also in Catania, Naples

individuals, the community or the environment. The rate of volunteering is equal to 12.6 percent of the population: one in every eight Italians. See: [www.Censimento permanente delle Istituzioni non profit](http://www.istat.it/it/nuovi-censimenti/censimento-permanente-delle-istituzioni-non-profit), ISTAT, 2024.

⁵⁵ Concerning the current counter-response of the State to the ever increasing invasiveness of the mafias, for the sake of a more effective synergy among the institutions, is the recent news of the successful meeting in the Marian Shrine considered the stronghold of 'Ndrangheta, between Interior Minister Minniti and the Bishop of Locri-Gerace, Monsignor Francesco Oliva. The weekly magazine of political and cultural information, *L'Espresso*, dated July 6, 2017, published an article by Michele Albanese, with the title: "In the shrine of the Godfathers: now Calabria wants to separate God from the 'Ndrangheta." It has always been before the Madonna di Polsi, in Calabria's most sacred place, that the clans held their rites of affiliation and summits. But the visit of Interior Minister Minniti and the bishop of Locri are the sign of a new willingness to reaffirm that religion and crime cannot stand together, and to give hope to the people" (<http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2017/07/05/news/nel-santuario-dei-padrini-ora-la-calabria-vuole-separare-dio-dalla-ndrangheta-1.305583>). On June 21, 2014, during his pastoral visit to Calabria, Pope Francis (Bergoglio), speaking at the Mass of *Corpus Domini* in the plains of Sibari, stated: "Those who have these evil paths in their lives, the *mafiosi*, they are not in communion with God; they are excommunicated." This is the first time that a Pope excommunicated the members of the 'Ndrangheta in such a dramatic fashion, describing the association as "the adoration of evil" (<http://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/il-papa-775371.aspx>).

⁵⁶ The path paved by Di Bella has been fully accepted among psychologists, to whom sufficed the important note entitled, significantly, *The right to existence*, written on July 9, 2017, following the signing of the July 1 governmental accord, by Tiziana Catalano (former Honorary Court Judge for juveniles and of the Appellate Court in Reggio Calabria, and consultant to the District Attorney's office and to the Courts of Reggio Calabria and Naples). See <https://www.calabriapost.net/storie>, pp.1-3.

and Catanzaro) referred not to precise relationships and existing rules but to unacceptable ethical principles, almost bordering on ethnic cleansing. Personally I remember very well the opinion of colleagues and lawyers, based mostly on misinformation and on a certain loose interpretation, who were more than a little perplexed by the bench-warrant arrests accrued. Certainly the winds were not only contrary: the courageous initiative of my colleagues in Reggio was shared and garnered the admiration of national and international media, even some from other continents.⁵⁷

That the new procedure is not coercive, punitive, or against the very principles of the family unit, as its many detractors have claimed, is demonstrated by the fact that this very project, Free to choose, devotes ample space to a proper path to rehabilitation for family members:

In parallel, the same network must be able to function with family members as well, by explaining to the parents (with the aid of a psychologist/specialized mediator who has studied the relational dynamics and the histories of the individual “families” [*cosche*]) the motivations and goals of the rulings as protective in nature, with the immediate objective of reducing the emotional impact and – not

⁵⁷ Luciano Trovato in his July 1, 2017 speech (cit., see footnote 47). News of the governmental accord, endorsed thanks to Roberto Di Bella’s initiative, was reported in all the Italian newspapers and has circulated worldwide: <http://m.todayonline.com/world/europe/italy-steps-rescue-plan-mafia-children>. On July 7, 2017, it was reported by a myriad of paper and online news sources in articles with very telling titles. These include, just to name a few, in India: www.google.it/amp/www.thehindu.com/news/international/italy-steps-up-rescue-plan-for-mafia-children/article19235184.ece/amp/; Singapore: <https://singapore.shafaqna.com/EN/SG/182291>; China: <https://chinanewscloud.com/2017/07/07/italy-steps-up-rescue-plan--for-mafia-children/>. Australia: <https://medium.com/@connieagius/the-italian-mafia-and-thier-violence-agaisnt-women>. Important western newspapers have been following Di Bella’s operation. Here we mention a few: Scandinavia, the *HelsinginSanomat*: <http://www.hs.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000005283462.html>; Great Britain: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/23/mafia-italy-ndrangheta-judge-breaks-families-save-children-reggio-calabria> (February 23, 2016); <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/24/banished-mob-italy-mafia-sons-exiled-crim> (September 24, 2014); “Justice system tries to save children of Mafia parents”, <http://www.west-info.eu/justice-system-tries-to-save-children-of-mafia-parents/2017.07.06>. Germany: <http://www.aol.de/video/kalabrien-richter-nimmt-mafia-familien-die-kinder-weg>; USA: “Moving children of mob families across Italy to break cycle of criminality”, *The New York Times* (February 11, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/10/world/europe/breaking-up-the-family-as-a-way-to-break-up-the-mob.html> (February 10, 2017); <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-italy-fights-mafia-with-new-strategy-banish-sons-2014sep27-story.html>; France: <http://www.lejdd.fr/International/Europe/Le-juge-qui-sauve-les-enfants-de-la-mafia-italienne-850403>; “Italie brise la Chaîne du crime en retirant leurs enfants aux gangster”, <https://actu.orange.fr/monde/l-italie-brise-la-chaine-du-crime-en-retirant-leurs-enfants-aux-mafieux>, (July 7, 2017); www.L-ACTU.fr, No. 5424, “Rencontre: EC juge veut sauver Les enfants de la mafia italienne” (October 24, 2017). In Spain: <http://www.infobae.com/america/2017/02/14/la-polemica-estrategia-de-un-juez-italiano-antimafia-para-cortar-el-ciclo-del-crimen/>; <http://eldoce.tv/mundo/el-juez-roberto-de-bella-calabria-italia-lucha-contra-mafia-le-quita-los-hijos-los-criminales-35418> (February 14, 2017). In the Netherlands: <https://witfilm.nl/en/projects/children-of-the-mafia> (July 17, 2017).

purely utopian – of involving the parents in the rehabilitation processes by leveraging their maternal and paternal sentiments.⁵⁸

The protocol (among the judicial offices) and the project (regarding the support networks for the rulings issued by the Court) Free to choose have the same title because they are two interconnected documents, which function together to achieve a common goal: the “cultural infiltration” necessary to rescue minors from exposure to the mafia dynamics which their families impose upon them. With its crucial lessons, this important document is the only one in Italy to have created “systematically an information network with the Anti-mafia District Prosecutor’s Office.”⁵⁹ And, as we have seen, it was created due to an awareness of the limitations inherent in the relocation rulings issued by the juvenile courts, which in themselves may not be sufficient to resolve the problem. In order to counteract the *‘ndrine*, it is necessary to take these comprehensive measures. The Court must become an efficient mechanism, equipped with tools to sniff out the stench of the mafia within an underground world that is so difficult to dig into and dredge. The protocol, drawn up and signed in the wake of those measures, stems from the consideration that

indispensable criminal prosecution or seizing of assets are not the only suitable means to eradicate the phenomenon of the *‘Ndrangheta*. It is primarily a cultural and self-sustaining phenomenon, maintained within the family, in a perverse spiral that is difficult to eradicate, above all because of the low incidence of criminals turning informant. The purpose of the agreement is to provide coordinated judicial intervention for the protection of underprivileged minors, either perpetrators or victims of crime.⁶⁰

The end goal of this collaborative effort – already successfully tested in some of the cases discussed in this book – is to guide young people in a direction of liberation from the mafia culture, in order to gain autonomy both in their lives and their work.

⁵⁸ Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Senate, cit., 2015, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Roberto Galullo, “Linea dura per togliere i figli alla *‘ndrangheta*”, *Il Sole 24 ore*, January 16, 2017, n. 15, pp. 1-7, p. 2.

⁶⁰ Michela Mancini, “La rivoluzione silenziosa di un tribunale di frontiera” (subtitled: “Il Tribunale dei Minorenni di Reggio Calabria, su iniziativa del presidente Roberto Di Bella, ha stanziato alcuni provvedimenti per allontanare provvisoriamente alcuni minori dalle famiglie di *‘ndrangheta*. Un modo – controverso e dibattuto – per dare a questi ragazzi un’alternativa alla mafia”), *Inchiesta Minori di ‘ndrangheta*, pp. 27-40, *Narcomafie*, January/February 2015, pp. 31-37, p. 35. The investigation is subtitled: “They grow up in families where violence is their daily bread, with fathers and brothers in prison or murdered, and mothers weeping and screaming for revenge. This is the fate of *‘Ndrangheta* children. It is necessary to intervene for their protection, in order to break the blood bond that fosters new recruitment to the organization.”

And the keyword, as Terry Eagleton reminds us, is ‘culture,’⁶¹ which is a human creation sharing a humble etymological root with the term ‘agriculture.’⁶² Therefore it alludes, figuratively speaking, to the cultivation of individuals, and among its various traditional meanings is that of a common ground of traditions and values handed down, accepted and shared, with a greater or lesser degree of awareness on the part of the people, depending on their social position and their degree of literacy. Here, then, is the reason why it is essential to counteract the mafia subculture with cultural weapons: the only means to provide, from an early age, the intellectual, dialectical, and critical tools needed to escape the influence of the mafia.

Recalling one of Falcone’s sayings on the importance of the school’s role – that is, that the mafia will be defeated by an army of elementary school teachers – we immediately enter into the meat of the problem and we begin to understand the operation of the Court and of the Juvenile Prosecutor of Reggio Calabria, whose goal is a constructive one for the children, not a destructive one for the families. The measures necessary for the protection of minors do not only consist in separating parents and children and removing the latter from their family home but, as already mentioned, also in providing a fundamental parallel task of re-establishing parental responsibility (whether incarcerated or not) when the parents manage to overcome all resistance and agree to undertake a new path. The signatories of the document make it very clear that, in order to give ‘Ndrangheta children a real chance at a life that breaks free and moves beyond the one imposed on them by their family and home environment, it is necessary to offer paths toward rehabilitation in both the civil and the criminal spheres, thus minimizing the difficulties of integration into the community. The intention is to entrust them to volunteer families (from associations such as Libera, Gerbera Gialla, and Addiopizzo) so as to expose them to other realities, environments, stimuli, and people. One must also bear in mind that giving custody to a community or family is always a temporary measure. The objective of the protocol, with its affiliated network of contacts, is (when possible) the parallel rehabilitation and reunification, under State supervision, of children and at least one of their parents: usually the mother, given that the fathers are often imprisoned, in hiding, or dead.

⁶¹ Terry Eagleton, *Culture*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2016, *passim*.

⁶² The term ‘culture’ derives from the Latin verb *colĕre* which means ‘to grow,’ even in the figurative sense of ‘to care for,’ ‘to treat with attention or respect,’ and therefore ‘to honor.’ More precisely, ‘culture’ derives from the neutral nominative plural *colturus*, the future participle of *colĕre*, that commonly has a final value and an active meaning. And “therefore, just as *ventura* refers to what is about to happen, and *nascitura* to one who is about to be born, so *cultura* refers to things having to do with cultivation, growing, honoring” (Massimo Angelini, *Alle origini della parola ‘cultura,’* http://www.montesquieu.it/biblioteca/Testi/Angelini_cultura.pdf, p.2).

The protocol has a dual effect: it saves the children and rehabilitates the parents, at first only the mothers, but as we shall see, now even the fathers are starting to be involved in this virtuous circle:

No one would dare to say that removing minors from these situations means taking them away from their loved ones; indeed, in all cases the measures are only limited and temporary and never completely sever family ties, but rather they give these minors the ability to choose, to discover that another world exists, that they have the same ability as all young people to explore their aspirations, their aptitudes, to choose [their own partner] without constraints.⁶³

The case of R.C., documented in the opening of this second portrait, is enlightening and outlines what one hopes will be the future for baby-collaborator V. of the previous portrait: even as he tells the courts about his father's criminal enterprises, he is still too young to have the tools necessary to suspend his typical child's credulity and admiration for the grownup who, by giving him an (evil) upbringing, teaches and transmits the (evil) mafia life.

2.4 Third Portrait. The case of siblings D. and N.

Tuesday, October 22, 2013, a Calabrian online newspaper publishes the following article entitled "Tentate estorsioni della cosca [...] a [...]. Il minore col ruolo di vertice, la lista degli obiettivi e il ruolo dei commercianti taglieggiati" [the attempted extortions of [...] by the *cosca*. The juvenile in the top position, the list of objectives, and the role of the merchants paying protection money].⁶⁴

They were stealing most of the economic resources used for maintaining members of the family, including those incarcerated, in order to acquire movable and immovable property and to launch commercial activities, taking over the economic activities of [...] by extorting money from small businesses and merchants. The *cosca* [...] of the Piana area was far from dead, and the forces of law and order knew this very well. So, they have kept an eye on the family's offspring and alleged new affiliates, and after many complex and multi-faceted investigations, coordinated by the District Anti-mafia Directive and the District Attorney at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, the staff of the Mobile Command Unit of Reggio Calabria, directed by Gennaro Semeraro, and the Commissariat P.S. of [...], directed by the deputy chief of police Fabio Catalano, they made two provisional arrests on suspicion of crime against four members, one being a minor, all believed responsible for mafia association and

⁶³ Tiziana Catalano, "Il diritto all'esistenza", cit., 2017, p. 2.

⁶⁴ www.strill.it/calabria/news/2013/10.

attempted extortion. The subjects are A.C. (class 1961), alias ‘P’; R.B. (class 1986); R.B. (class 1977); and [D.S.], juvenile. They are still actively pursuing a fifth subject, also a minor, who is currently unaccounted for.

The current operation should be considered as the natural continuation of the now famous operations Cosa Mia I, II and III which, from 2010 onwards, have dealt severe blows to the *cosca* [...] of [...], from top to bottom. Today’s operation was a success and a great source of happiness for former Chief Prosecutor Federico Cafiero De Raho, especially in the way he managed to catch the arrested subjects: “This is the start of a virtuous circle represented by the police reports made by those who have suffered extortion. The ‘Ndrangheta”, adds De Raho, “works in what I would call an almost mechanical manner in the area: extortions are still carried out extensively. What does emerge from the operation, however”, he then points out, “is that the *cosca* [...] deployed minors who bear the title of higher-ups in the organization. The minors deployed as soldiers today used to fill the role of unskilled labor, much lower, I would say, than what they are forced to take on today, precisely because the organization itself is in a weakened state.”

The chief prosecutor’s reflection, which echoes the words of Chief of Police Guido Longo: “extortion is the litmus test of the ‘Ndrangheta’s territorial reign. Thanks to operations in recent years, most of the leaders of the *cosca* are in prison, but their family members still try to continue the criminal activity.” This new element is represented by the declarations in which some of the area business owners and merchants (one working in the construction sector, the other in the field of trade and the third, also the victim of loan sharking, as a food product representative) have provided the crucial confirmations of what had emerged in the parallel investigations carried out against affiliates and members of the *cosca*.

The District Attorney at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Carlo Macrì, in stressing full coordination on investigations and full agreement on the application of detention orders, focuses on the fact that beyond the attempts at extortion, the operation demonstrates that there is a certain determination on the part of the *cosca* regarding the community of that area to demonstrate their presence and to continue to exercise criminal authority despite arrests that have hit the family hard. Regarding the position of [D.S.], Macrì is categorical: “Do not think for a minute that we are talking about a juvenile in the lower rank and file; on the contrary, he presents himself as his own man, with a very specific role, he makes himself known and wants to assert his own authority.” Macrì also regrets that already in 2010, the District Attorney’s office tried to handle the child in question by asking for his removal from the family (both parents had been arrested) in order to begin a rehabilitation process: “But we weren’t able to begin the process due to the delays and constraints of the local

Social Services” which never followed through on the task. Suffice it to say, moreover, that a second ruling from last July is still outstanding as well. Chief of Police Longo emphasized this point as well, offering both praise and full support for “the virtuous path that aims at rehabilitating minors” undertaken by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria: “When Prosecutor Macrì says that the judicial authority made its ruling but that it is unfortunately unable to do anything further, this demonstrates just how difficult is the path ahead of us. It is important to understand that we are all part of the State, that we have to work together.” The Police Chief’s statement is an invitation “to those who have not done their job to start doing so from today onwards, because what happened is truly scandalous.” The head of the mobile command, Gennaro Semeraro, also stresses the importance of collaboration on the part of the victims: “It has opened a door: reporting to the police is the only means”, he says “to effectively combat the parasitic activity of the *pizzo*.” This is to be understood not only as income obtained through extortion, but also as an imposition on business owners to provide much-needed labor for the *cosca*.

Deputy chief of police Catalano also emphasizes the delicacy and the difficulty of an investigation that has finally prevailed over the business owners’ trepidations (though they risked the same fate as their fellow merchants indicted for aiding and abetting). In doing so he also reveals an important detail: “We intercepted the extortion list that certain prisoners had written to their relatives. Through a laborious investigation we managed to get our hands on this sheet and therefore on the intended victims.” Nevertheless, it should be noted that the investigation discovered another minor at large, albeit with a minor role as compared to [D.S.]. On this Macrì is clear: “He was checked in an intimate manner because he was trying to hide the list of extortion victims, as well as a roll of money, inside of his underpants. I cannot say more at the moment.”

At the time of the occurrence D. (born in 1997), one of the two juvenile protagonists of the story, was sixteen years old. Son of the boss of [*omissis*], he was following the mafia upbringing he received from his family. As a result of the facts reported in the article, D. was investigated

for the crime in accordance with Art. 416 bis c.p., with the specific complaint of having been part of the nefarious association of the same name and, in particular, for having contributed to the management of the extortion activity performed in the interest of the [criminal] association⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Sentence of the Juvenile of Reggio Calabria, January 23, 2014, p. 9 (meeting in council: President Roberto Di Bella, Judge Francesca Di Landro, Honorary Judges Pierangela Salemi and Aldo Musmeci), p. 2. Note that in this essay ‘c.p.’ always stands for ‘codice penale’ (current penal code).

and, subsequently, sentenced to imprisonment in a juvenile facility for the crime of mafia association and for attempted extortion with multiple aggravating circumstances. The sentence issued by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria on November 4, 2014, states:

D. is guilty as charged, which fulfills the prerequisite of continuity, and, with the lowering of the minor age equivalent to the aggravating circumstances sub b), excluding that referred to in Art. 112 Number 4 c.p., the court sentences him to the penalty of five years and two months of imprisonment and a fine of 1000 Euro, thus reduced due to summary judgment. [...] The court declares D. banned from all public offices for the duration of five years.

Thanks to a reduction of the penalty,⁶⁶ D. spent three years and five months in prison. He is now twenty years of age. He is free – but placed on probation for a minor offense (conspiracy to commit drug trafficking) made before his arrest⁶⁷ – and finally reunited with his mother and his sister. His mother served five years in prison, during which she asked the Juvenile Court of Reggio for help to escape and start a new life away from the criminal lifestyle of her husband's family. Today, with the help of the Association Libera, all three of them live together, far from Calabria, in a secret location in the North of Italy.

During the period spent in the juvenile prison, D. was followed closely, for a year and a half with bi-monthly meetings, by an excellent and experienced psychologist who accompanied him along the difficult path of self-redefinition. And precisely to the situation of mafia children in these sorts of conditions a 2019 TV film is dedicated, sponsored by RAI (Italian Radio and Television).⁶⁸ Enrico

⁶⁶ The process of appeal (the second level of judgment in the Italian system) reduced his penalty by one year, and he was granted a further reduction of some months for 'good conduct.'

⁶⁷ The juvenile trial is adjudicated in the stage of the preliminary hearing that, among its various outcomes, can provide for the suspension of the trial with the consequent probation of the accused (art. 28 d.p.r. 22.9.1988 n. 448). The latter institute, which consists of a rehabilitative path under the control of the competent authorities, is applied in cases in which the Court considers that there exists the concrete possibility of a positive transformation of the accused's personality (deduced from the acquired awareness of the disvalue of the deed committed, and by the accused's own admission). The probation period has a duration not exceeding three years for offenses with a sentence of life imprisonment or imprisonment of not less than 12 years; in other cases, the period must not exceed one year. In certain cases the probation period may be partially or totally spent in a community facility. The probation may be revoked. In the case of a positive outcome, the offense is no longer punishable (<http://www.tribmin.reggiocalabria.giustizia.it/chisiamo/470/875/>).

⁶⁸ The film on the 'Ndrangheta youngsters entitled *Liberi di scegliere (Free to choose)* was first broadcasted on Rai 1 channel on January 22, 2019. The TV film, directed by Giacomo Campiotti and produced by Angelo Barbagallo's Bibi Film and RAI Fiction, was shot in Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily. Characters are played by the famous Italian actor Alessandro Preziosi, along with Nicole Grimaudo, Federica De Cola, Carmine Bruschini and Francesco Colella. The plot is based on the stories produced by the protocol *Free to choose*, which has tried to breathe new life and

Interdonato⁶⁹ the psychologist also interviewed by the New York Times⁷⁰ who has followed both R.C. and D., told me that

the kid has changed a lot and has made great progress from a teenager full of anger and violence who would hit just for the sake of hitting and who went around all arrogant and threatening, protected by the name of his ' *ndrina* (the most powerful in the area), to extort money and threaten reprisals against merchants and shopkeepers in the name of his family, reduced to poverty by the Court's capital measures and penalties against his parents and other numerous relatives convicted as mafia members.⁷¹

Today D. wants to go back to school, get his diploma, and find a job, and he seems convinced that he wants to try his best to avoid slipping back into the underworld of his past. From this it can be hoped that his future holds a better fate for him than the seemingly unavoidable and inescapable one imposed by his family.

As for his sister N. (class 1998) who grew up in the same environment, she has from a young age been involved in the nefarious activity of her family, to the point of being stopped by the police while she was in the company of adult members of the *cosca* that bears her name. At the time of arrest, on December 9, 2011, she had on her person a considerable sum of money of illicit origin (extortion payments) and other documents of great legal importance (a calendar containing suspicious annotations) that, as she herself would admit in front of the police officer, she had quickly hidden inside her panties in order to prevent them being found.⁷² In the years immediately following, the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, having meticulously assessed the situation of the girl – bearing in mind the context of organized crime affiliation, the arrest of both her parents and brother, the non-suitability of close relatives (*mafiosi* and in prison) to take care

dignity into the children of the 'Ndrangheta. Trailer available on line: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQLRwW85GJA>.

⁶⁹ Enrico Interdonato, psychologist and founding partner of the anti-racketeering association *Committee Addiopizzo Messina-Onlus* (see footnote 37), is a person of great experience in the field of psycho-educational work with children from 'Ndrangheta families, having in the course of his training delved into correlations of the mafia psyche, i.e. the study of psychological variables that form the personality of *mafiosi* within criminal organizations. Interdonato, thanks to his professional knowledge and expertise in treatment/intervention with this specific group has achieved results that, albeit partial, have proved to be encouraging.

⁷⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/breaking-up-the-family-as-a-way-to-break-up-the-mob.htm> Feb 10, 2017 .

⁷¹ Private Conversation, June 15, 2017.

⁷² Sentence of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, November 4, 2014, p. 21, by President Di Bella.

of her – saw conditions that justified limiting the father and mother’s parental rights and entrusting N. to the Office of Juvenile Social Services

for the necessary assistance, psychological support and supervision, to be accomplished by Social Services and Social Healthcare Services in the region where the child will be placed.⁷³

This solution appeared to be the only practicable means to avoid retaliation, to remove the girl from an inevitable fate, and to

allow the child to experience cultural, emotional, psychological contexts and an alternative lifestyle to that of her corrupt background, in the hope that she can free herself from the influence of her upbringing [...] This determination is in line with the principles for the protection of minors established by internal legislation and using the guidelines of the most important international conventions in this field, including the one in New York in 1989, wherein was emphasized the principle that the family must educate the child to live in civil society and raise this child with the principles of peace, tolerance, dignity and solidarity and, likewise, to preserve the child from the risks inherent in the transgression of these rules.⁷⁴

N., unlike her brother D., showed no willingness to follow the path chosen for her by the family *cosca*. From the documents emerge her continuous state of anxiety due to the crushing control exercised by her family and, in particular, by her brother D. who “was very possessive of her, and would not let her go out unless she was accompanied by his friends.”⁷⁵ This portion of her declaration reveals the status of masculine prevarication and feminine submission which still comprises the homocentric reality of the ‘Ndrangheta. Crime, forced involvement in illicit activities, suffocating control, blind obedience, retaliation, lack of freedom, anxiety, fear: these are the family rosary beads which we see recited before our eyes when reading the decree regarding the young N.

Her doubts about her home environment and upbringing take shape in admissions made to the nun who was taking care of her during the time spent away from home and are reported in the minutes of the Court:

The willingness of the girl to leave and her very clear worries (“N. had just entered into our home when she told me that she wanted to leave Calabria; one day she expressed her fear of ending up in prison like her entire family”) were reiterated by Sister A.P. before the P.M.⁷⁶

⁷³ Decree of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, January 23, 2014, cit., p. 7.

⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 5-6.

⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 4.

The young N.'s words support the course of action adopted by Di Bella who, in the last five years of implementation, has handled forty cases with twenty-five removals from the family, including, as in the case just saw, some relating to young girls. These numbers demonstrate a well-reasoned but painful choice:

There is no 'confiscation,' 'deportation,' 'ethnic cleansing' or punitive logic as we have been accused. We work within a solid regulatory framework and our objective is the protection of minors.⁷⁷

The removed minor is temporarily entrusted to a facility or to family homes thanks to which

he or she returns to school, undergoes rehabilitation toward a life of legality with psychologists, educators and volunteers from associations such as Libera and Addiopizzo, expresses him or herself freely. When the minor approaches the legal age it is he or she who asks us for help never to have to return to Calabria.⁷⁸

2.5 Family

To understand the reasons behind the accounts in the three previous portraits, more must be said about some of their underlying conditions. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, scholars of psychology,⁷⁹ anthropology,⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Roberto Di Bella, in a private conversation on April 26, 2016.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁹ The concept of imitation constitutes the nucleus of Gabriel Tarde's (1843-1904) social psychology that considered this psychological phenomenon as fundamental in the creation of social relations. Tarde was the first to study scientifically the social phenomenon of imitation, analyzing its *laws* in his foundational work *Le leggi dell'imitazione* [The Laws of Imitation]. Imitation, according to Tarde, is an elementary social phenomenon, in that society is defined as "a group of people who have among them many similarities produced by means imitation." His is a veritable mimetic anthropology: "The social being, in being social, is essentially an imitator." Later Jean Piaget (1896-1980), in *The Child's Conception of the World* (English translation, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1932), focused on imitation by connecting it to the mental development of the child when, around the second year of age, on a sensory-motor level, where there already exists a primitive semiotics (symbolic play, drawing, language), the child moves on to that mental representative stage in which he or she masters imitation even without a model to imitate. This is the stage of "deferred imitation" which Piaget discusses in *Six psychological studies* (English translation, New York: Random House, 1967). This imitative behavior relates not only to the isolated individual but also to one who enters into a relationship with society through the imitation of shared gestures, sayings, and actions, as happens for example in a relationship of friendship. In psychology the concept of 'identification' is also fundamental, in that it represents the process by which an individual creates his or her own personality by assimilating one or more traits of another individual and modelling his or her own upon them.

⁸⁰ Anthropology has turned its attention to the phenomenon of imitation, which French anthropologist René Girard has developed and taken to be a fundamental instance of human action within his mimetic theory, stating that all human actions are determined by his or her desire to

psychoanalysis,⁸¹ and psychiatry have shown, in the variety of their respective theoretical approaches and schools of thought, the important role that imitation plays in the development process of an individual.⁸² In the developmental stage, nothing is more detrimental than bad role models offered to the child, all the more so if that child is deprived of the possibility for comparison and dialectic, leaving no room for other choices that do not coincide with those set forth by the parents. The children of the ‘Ndrangheta are the designated successors of the criminal tradition of their family from the moment of their conception, which is never “simply biological, but also cultural and psychic” (Lo Verso).⁸³ Recently

emulate and imitate someone who appears happy (*mimetic desire*) because he or she hopes to acquire this same happiness. (R. Girard, *Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque*, Paris, Grasset, 1961; English translation English translation: *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

⁸¹ Psychoanalysis considers imitation to be a phenomenon of identification for the most part with the child’s own parents, and it focuses on particular pathological aspects such as hysterical imitation originating from the phenomenon of suggestion which also generates, as Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) elucidates, the imitation of unintentional mass hysteria: “In the widest sense *involuntary imitation* belongs to the phenomena of suggestion [...]. In a crowd the single person loses his self-control not because he himself is enthused but because the crowd infect him. Thus passions spread and it is in such imitation that fashions and customs have their source. [...] We exercise judgments, affirm values and take up attitudes which we have simply taken over from others without intending or knowing that we have done so. It is not our judgment, evaluation or attitude yet we feel *it is ours*. This acceptance of others’ judgment as our own along with the semblance of its being our own all the same has been termed ‘suggested judgment.’ [...] But suggestions may also be *intended* and in that case the concept of suggestin grows more circumscribed and is of more superficial application. It then signifies only the intentional influence of people on each other (which in its intensified form becomes hypnosis).” K. Jaspers, English translation, *General Psychopathology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 377-78. On manipulation, see Mario Di Fiorino, *La persuasione socialmente accettata, il plagio e il lavaggio del cervello*, Forte dei Marmi, Psichiatria e Territorio vol. I, 1990. Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) in his famous work “The Structure of the Unconscious” [1916] (English translation in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, ed. and trans. Gerhard Adler and R.F.C. Hull, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 1966, 7: pp. 269-304), wrote that society is organized not so much by laws as by the tendency toward imitation. He argues that copying, emulating, trying to live like those who appear successful, seem to be the viaticum for current human generations. A criminal who knows how to become a successful role model or who becomes wealthy by stealing or taking advantage of the naivety of others, or a person who knows how to profit from his talents for manipulation, becomes the example to follow in order to reach the highest goals in life.

⁸² ‘Imitation’ (see *Enciclopedia Treccani*): “A dynamic process, typically infantile, on which depends much of the individual’s learning and development of the personality. This occurs through the adoption of models: the child reproduces the gestures, expressions, or attitudes of adults and parents in particular. In sociological psychology imitation indicates the process by which the elements of a person’s or a group’s culture are absorbed and duplicated in the person’s behavior or in some of its roles within a framework similar to or different from the one in which the original elements function. This concept was highlighted by G. Tarde (*Les lois de l’imitation*, 1890), who saw in it the fundamental principle of socialization. Every homogeneity of emotions, habits, actions, and thus every resulting form of social aggregation, is possible, according to Tarde, only in so far as the spirit of imitation is inherent in the individuals, leading each of them always to adapt to the example of others.”

⁸³ Lo Verso, cit., 1998, p. 27. On the history of ‘Ndrangheta, please refer to the abovementioned detailed book by Gratteri and Nicaso, *Fratelli di sangue* (2008); the essay of Mario Casaburi,

psychology, in particular the Italian method of group analysis of the subject, has redefined the relationship between psychic life and relationships with others. Lo Verso explains that:

the psychic life and identity are born as well from the fact that the parents “transmit” and actively offer themselves to the newborn child, and that these children develop by means of identification with the parents.⁸⁴

The family into which one is born, as well, is always a psychological and relational field closely connected to the surrounding society. In this case, the ‘Ndrangheta family imposes itself and is perceived as sacred and inviolable,

regulated and devised by a cultural world which largely defines within it the criteria of good and evil, of fair and unfair.⁸⁵

The great strength of the ‘Ndrangheta – today the most powerful mafia organization in the world with an annual revenue evaluated at around 44 billion Euro⁸⁶ – is that of availing itself of the connection between the biological family

Borghesia mafiosa. La 'ndrangheta dalle origini ai giorni nostri (Roma, Dedalo, 2010), in which he analyzes the historical, economic, social, and cultural causes of the ‘Ndrangheta from its birth up to our time, focusing particularly on the origins and motives of its rapid dissemination at the national and international level; in Isaiah Sales, *Storia dell'Italia mafiosa. Perché le mafie hanno avuto successo* (Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2015), an important and rigorous study of history, politics and criminal psychology. On the psychological aspects see Emanuele Coppola, Serena Giunta, Girolamo Lo Verso (a cura di), “La ‘Ndrangheta tra la realtà detentiva e l’idealità organizzativa: una ricerca psicologico-clinica”, *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*, 1, 2010, pp. 80-99. On historical-sociological aspects see Anna Sergi and Anita Lavorgna, *The Global Dimension of the Most Powerful Italian Mafia* (London, Palgrave, 2016), which shows that ‘Ndrangheta clans have an innovative way of existing and performing mafia work through a dense network of relationships both in the “upperworld” and in the “underworld” and explores why the ‘Ndrangheta is today viewed as “the most powerful Italian mafia.”

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁵ Lo Verso, cit., p. 27. Documented here below is the definition taken from the *Relazione Semestrale del Ministro dell'interno al Parlamento sull'attività svolta e sui risultati conseguiti dalla Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA)* [Semi-Annual Report of the Minister of the Interior to Parliament on the Activities Carried Out and the Results Achieved by the Anti-Mafia Investigative Directive], the first half of 2016, in paragraph 3, entitled *Calabrian Organized Crime*, p. 68, note 148: “The family, understood as nuclear and characterized by blood ties between its members, constitutes the basic social unit of the ‘Ndrangheta model which, strong in its familial solidarity, whether they be ascending, descending, lateral or acquired as a result of marriage, has demonstrated little vulnerability with regard to the phenomena of defection or judicial collaboration” (<http://direzioneeinvestigativaantimafia.interno.gov.it/semestrali/sem/2016/1sem2016.pdf>).

⁸⁶ The financial and economic power of the ‘Ndrangheta is enormous. It is a veritable empire that has solid foundations in Calabria and branches in all continents. An in-depth study on the wealth of the ‘ndrine in the EURISPES 2008 estimated that a revenue of 44 billion Euro per year, equal to 2.9% of national GDP, more than the entire economy of Estonia (13.2 billion Euro) and Slovenia (30.4 billion Euro) put together. More recently, according to a ranking of Italian companies produced by the research department of Mediobanca, “With its 52.6 billion yearly [...] the

and the social family. The overlap of the two has created that unique quality which is characteristic of the 'Ndrangheta and which is absent in those criminal organizations loosely called 'the Mafia,' but that are not in fact mafia:⁸⁷ in other words, the pervasive subculture, based on links that are intra-family and inter-family, popular and populist, widely shared. The context of this problem addressed by the Court and by the Juvenile Public Prosecutor of Reggio Calabria relates precisely to the deleterious effects of this mafia culture on children.

The 'Ndrangheta children pass through childhood – a fundamental period of the adult individual's development – in the midst of degradation, exposed to stress, to stimuli, to deviant family role models operating under the banner of illegality and mafia crime.

Maria Stefanelli gives an inside view of what it is like to be born and to live in this type of family and environment. An 'Ndrangheta daughter and the widow of Francesco "Ciccio" Marando, a powerful Calabrian boss and drug trafficker who ruled the region around Turin, she became a State's witness and the protagonist of an autobiographical book dedicated to her own daughter in which she reveals the harassment and abuse, both physical and psychological, which she suffered from childhood:

To grow up in an 'Ndrangheta family is also this: the torment of seeing images of death, violence, and madness as completely commonplace.⁸⁸

These minors reach adolescence immersed in this environment (small villages or city neighborhoods with a high density of crime) where day after day they are

'Ndrangheta would rank as the fourth highest Italian company for revenue. A colossus surpassed only by Eni, Fiat-Exor and Enel" (Gratteri and Nicaso, *Fiumi d'oro, Come la 'ndrangheta investe i soldi della cocaina nell'economia legale*, Milano, Mondadori, first edition October 2017, p. 27). This is a very controversial issue on which no agreement has yet been reached. On the 'Ndrangheta's enormous global business and on the means to combat it, we highly recommend the recent, well researched work by Gratteri and Nicaso, *Fiumi d'oro* mentioned above. On page 29 the two authors note that in 1997 the American Senator John Kerry, future Secretary of State and candidate in the 2004 presidential elections, underscores on page 21 of his book *The New War. The Web of crime that threatens America's Security* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1997) the importance of the Italian mafias, numbering among the "Big Five", together with the Russian Vory v Zakone, the Japanese Yakuza, the Chinese triads and the Columbian cartels. According to Kerry, "the global criminal axis" represents the third largest financial power after the United States and Europe. Moreover, on page 35, Gratteri and Nicaso note that in 2008 the US government placed the 'Ndrangheta on a "black list" of major organizations devoted to drug trafficking [...]. The list also includes Al Qaeda and the PKK, the Kurdistan Worker's Party."

⁸⁷ On the use and misuse of the term 'Mafia' (applied to criminal organizations of a different nature), see Salvatore Lupo, *Storia della mafia. Dalle origini ai giorni nostri* [1993], Roma, Donzelli, 2004, pp. 11-18.

⁸⁸ Maria Stefanelli and Manuela Mareso, *Loro mi cercano ancora*, Milano, Mondadori, 2014, p. 5.

bombarded with the elements of mafia culture which exert a strong pull on them, while still in a crucial stage of their identity development. The system draws them in by relieving them from the sedom and everyday tasks imposed by school and by social norms. They enter into an environment of immediate economic means, power, supremacy, leadership, bullying ... and not only among their peers. Just this summer, as we have already mentioned, came the news of the fifteen-year-old who sent a letter to the powerful boss of Locri, Antonio Pappuzzedda Cataldo – currently in prison – wanting to join the ‘Ndrangheta:

I, the undersigned [*omissis*], would like to make myself available to you and your family.⁸⁹

There is no attestation more direct or genuine to describe the admiration which *cosca* boss Pappuzzedda still enjoys in Locri, as if his criminal record was an example to emulate. The local teenagers consider him an idol, inspiring them to achieve the same respect and power. This is a subculture that distorts the relationship with government institutions, viewing them prejudicially as enemies. It is this same subculture of oppression and violence that journalist Mancini, in February of 2014, expressed at the beginning of her investigation into the children of Calabrian mob:

They live in a state of permanent warfare in a world divided by a trench. Arrayed as soldiers: they are on one side, on the other is the Country. Educated in the name of honor, they have grown up learning only one “rule”: the mafia rule. Before everything else comes the family, which in their lands mean the ‘Ndrangheta. At the age of fourteen they are already made men: they are children of the mafia. On behalf of their fugitive or incarcerated parents, they collect bribes from merchants, they traffic drugs, they kill. It is part of the rules, they cannot say no, they are not allowed to turn back. Some, they say, have the faces of police officers tattooed on the soles of their feet, so while walking around they can trample on the State: a State they don’t even know.⁹⁰

With this additional information, let us return to V., the baby-collaborator now eleven years old. In order to outline certain traits of his childhood we shall use the acts of the Court.

In the decree of September 29, 2015, we learn through numerous audio and video interceptions, executed by investigators inside the Volkswagen Golf TG of V.’s father, that

⁸⁹ See footnote 35. See also <http://ildispaccio.it/primo-piano/149954-il-15enne-di-locri-che-scrive-al-boss-per-affiliarsi-alla-ndrangheta>

⁹⁰ Michela Mancini, *Dalle madri ai figli. Se la ‘ndrangheta perde i suoi soldati*, February 28, 2014, *Calabria*; <http://www.liberainformazione.org/2014/02/28>.

as the parent, on several occasions, he allowed the children to overhear conversations with some high-level members of the above-named mafia faction, even when they spoke openly about arranging the physical elimination of “rivals” belonging to other “ndrine” (see the interception in the acts of December 20, 2013, sequence 68-69, wherein G. makes the sign of slitting their throats in the presence of his daughter M., as well as of December 23, 2013, wherein the younger son V. offers to keep an object likely of unlawful possession for his father, in order to avoid the inspections of the Carabinieri,⁹¹ an institution considered the enemy, thus manifesting adherence to his paternal educational model (according to which it is considered completely appropriate to possess an illegal gun, while inspection and reprimand by law enforcement is considered unfair). Moreover, from the interception of communications (audio and video) which took place on December 31, 2013[...] it emerges that G. handled firearms in the presence of the child V. who then, under paternal guidance and in the presence of other associates, uses a firearm himself to spray shots (V.: “I want to shoot some more ... Dad, can I try one more time?”), thus revealing an incongruous and alarming familiarity with weapons, considering his tender age (at the time just nine years old).⁹²

The facts are clear. At the age of six a child (M.) sees her father make the sign of slitting his enemies’ throats, and not in jest. At the age of nine a child (V.) volunteers to fool the Carabinieri and, proud to be seen as a big boy, is encouraged by his father to shoot with a real weapon. Here we catch a glimpse into the makeup of a subculture in which these ‘Ndrangheta children are trapped from the earliest moments of their existence:

If you are born into an ‘Ndrangheta family, you have no dreams, only a destiny. If you are male, before you even learn to babble, you learn to punch. You cannot cry, you cannot run to your mother, you would be considered weak. You must stay firm. Tough. At less than ten years old you learn to shoot, when you come of age you are ready to kill. If you are female you must clean the house, give birth, take beatings, stay silent, immobile, deaf. Don’t try to understand, ever. Because the mafia is a business which is handed down.⁹³

‘Ndrangheta children do not have autonomous ideals to realize, but rather an already marked road to follow, the outcome of which is almost always, statistically, an early violent death or hard time in prison.

This is the reason why Di Bella took action with his Court.

⁹¹ The child V.: “*then give it to me, they don’t, they won’t look at me...because I’m so small*”, Decree No. 32/15 R.G. Vol. Lega., 29.9.2015, p .2

⁹² *Ibidem*.

⁹³ Andreana Illiano, *il-baby-pentito-che-scuote-la-ndrangheta*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.robortosaviano.com>.

The work of the judiciary has shown how biological mafia families guarantee themselves power over their territory thanks to generational continuity through the systematic indoctrination of their children, and that the phenomenon of 'Ndrangheta children, i.e. that of the transmission of a mafia culture from father to son, is "endemic, often hidden, and for too long it has been underestimated" (Di Bella).⁹⁴ To better explain this idea, we often draw a parallel between the 'Ndrangheta perpetually at war, both within its own ranks and against the world, for the conquest/confirmation of its own power, and an army that has a continuous need of soldiers: the sons of the 'ndranghetisti are these soldiers. If the soldiers were removed, the army would become weak and more easily combated.⁹⁵ A keen awareness of the transmissibility of 'Ndrangheta culture has motivated the Court of Reggio to act in order to save these children.

In the light of this information, let us return to the cases of the three previous portraits in order to examine the situations of these young protagonists and what the Court has actually done for them.

2.6 *The Young V.*

What brought V. to tell his story to the magistrates?

The story stems from his mother A.'s decision to try to give her three children a brighter future by removing them from the conditions set by their paternal mafia family. A. turned to the competent authorities in search of help, and thus became a State's witness under serious personal risk. In fact, for the 'Ndrangheta, whoever dissociates and speaks with State officials is a traitor, a rat who, according to their primitive mafia code, must be reduced to silence and eliminated without mercy.

⁹⁴ Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Senate, cit., 2015, p. 1.

⁹⁵ Michela Mancini (2015, cit., p. 35): "In the last [25] years the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria has handled about 100 trials for mafia association and more than 50 trials for murders and attempted murder against minors,* many of whom – now adults – are subjected to 41 bis or were killed in the course of feuds between the 'ndrine. These are significant numbers confirmed by different sources. For example, the magistrate Nicola Gratteri and the historian Enzo Cicone mention these statistics: 'From the data it has surfaced that 59% of 'Ndrangheta affiliates at the end of 2005 were less than 45 years of age, confirming the ease with which the 'ndrine are able to replenish their workforce. Enzo Cicone has examined 52 trial sentences given in Calabria from 1884 to 1915, noting that defendants aged between 14 and 30 years accounted for 71.58 % of the total.'" Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso recall that: "In the course of the second mafia war in Reggio Calabria, many minors were used as hit men, some of whom were killed" (*Fratelli di sangue*, cit., 2008, p. 36). *For cases linked to its jurisdiction, concerning young people between the ages of 11 and 17, Di Bella specifies: "The sentences were around fifteen years; in many other cases there have been absolutions (witnesses were inaccurate or have retracted their statements), or the minors were acquitted of murder because they were under 14 years of age and therefore not held accountable" (private conversation with the author, October 28, 2016).

Nevertheless, this mother resolved to request the assistance of the State. And in response to the request made by the District Attorney's office, she was admitted to the special witness protection program.⁹⁶ The boldness with which the baby-collaborator speaks to the magistrates, according to his mother, is due to the fact that V.

seems more grown up than his age, because he was accustomed to doing things like an adult, to seeing weapons and drugs. Certainly if I had not made the decision to leave [...], I would have an 'ndraghetista son, either in prison or already killed by the age of fourteen.⁹⁷

The mother's statements – all backed up by incontestable facts – are those of an adult who has made a radical choice in her life and in that of her three children, while the words of V. are those of a child who recounts, uncritically and with great admiration, the facts of his life with his dad.⁹⁸

However, the life evoked by his words is not a life fit for a child. The key words from his statements to the Public Minister Giulia Pantano – who carried out the investigation and collected testimony first from the mother's outburst, then from the son's reconstructions – are: "guns", "drugs" and "illegal activities." V. speaks quite calmly of the domineering control exercised by his father, to the point that in the town where they lived, and which he controlled, nothing happened without his approval. The child already shows great familiarity with the mafia concepts of "family" and "honor." His testimony reveals that for him it is normal to do things in secret, to deceive law enforcement officers, to act with impudence and arrogance.

Here one observes a family dynamic in which the father/master reigns without scruples, the submissive and desperate mother tries to survive, and the children

⁹⁶ With the decree n. 8 of 1991, a "reward" system for "collaborators with the State" on mafia crimes was introduced in the Italian legal system, similar to the disciplinary strategy previously adopted for terrorist offenses. In 2001, the measures in favor of "*pentiti*" were substantially extended to "State's witnesses" (see in particular Articles 13, 16B and 18C). The witnesses are identified as those who "with regard to the criminal offense(s) to which they are bearing testimony, assume solely the quality of an injured party or of a person informed of the facts, or of a witness" on condition that they are not the subject of preventive measures. For the differences between the legislation on collaborators with the State and on State's witnesses, see the A.C. 3500, proposed by Rosy Bindi, (current President of the Parliamentary Commission, which introduces in to the set of rules a special legislation fully dedicated to State's witnesses. For further information, see the website www.Documents.Room.it.

⁹⁷ Decree no. 32/15, R.G. Vol. Lega. of 29.09.2015, cit., p. 1.

⁹⁸ After the arrest of the father G., while trials were under way at the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria concerning himself and his three children, the mother A. stated: "Now I am trying to teach V. true values, which have been totally subverted for him, given his extreme attachment to his father, about whom he still asks me even today." Ivi, p. 4.

know more than most adults, but in a perverse and aberrant way. The mother's declarations to the magistrates confirm this dynamic:

Mrs. A., during the s.i.t. interview held on June 30, 2015, highlighted the depth of her husband's criminality, mentioning that "from childhood he was at the disposal of his mafia family [...] and called upon and used by members of the family to carry out crimes"; she remarked how "the family ... in addition to extortion and loan sharking and other crimes he dedicated himself to drug trafficking", affirming to have personally seen her husband "cut drugs on a low wall at home" and to have learned from her younger son V., which he in turn learned from the father, that "the criminal gang [...] imported drugs from Cuba and that the drugs also came in through Sardinia." She then reported, "I do not have any rights over my son V." (the eldest of the three) "primarily because he was too attached to his father and, secondly, because my husband G. took control and wanted to bring V. with him to show him weapons and drugs", and she has tried in vain to "get him back and teach him to behave well because the father's influence prevailed" over her own. Called back again on August 7, 2015, she reiterated how her husband liked "to cut corners and be a Mafioso" and "make easy money" without caring "about the fact that his children, especially the younger V., see and witness things meant for adults which are illegal", repeating to the young V.: "You need to learn to cut powder!!". And again on September 18, 2015, she declared how in one instance G. had hosted "three fugitives of the family [...]", putting the apartment at their disposal for the night, and having them dine with her children.⁹⁹

A family in which the mother learns second hand: a) from her nine-year-old son that he knows all the details of his father's illegal activities, and (b) from the arrest warrant, which has resulted in her husband's imprisonment, that her son was handling weapons and preparing drugs.

A family in which a father considers it completely normal to teach his son to shoot and cut cocaine. A family in which three children share their home and meals with fugitives belonging to one of the most powerful and feared 'Ndrangheta *cosche* in the area. It is clear from the statements that the relationship between the husband and wife was neither idyllic nor respectful: the father G. was dominant and aggressive, and the mother A. submissive and resigned.

Until the moment in which A. – herself a daughter of this subculture that requires women to transmit its family values to the children, to be faithful guardians of its traditions, to practice *omertà*¹⁰⁰ – opposes her passive and submissive fate and,

⁹⁹ Ivi, p. 2-3.

¹⁰⁰ "His mother A., in the past, claimed responsibility for crimes she had not committed in order to protect her husband. She was pregnant when, during a raid by the *Carabinieri*, she hid ammunition

faced with evidence of the progressive ruin of her children caused by their own father, she rebels. She leaves her home, faces the arduous path that has alienated her from the world she knows, and chooses the chance to build another life.

The mother is convinced she must rely on the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, presided over by Di Bella who, on Tuesday September 29, 2015, signed the sentences for the case relating to V. (born in 2004) and his two younger brothers (S. and M., born in 2006 and 2007, respectively). All three children belong to G., who today is in prison for the offense of Art. 416 bis as the second in command of [omissis], a powerful 'Ndrangheta family of the Piana di Gioia Tauro. Following the path of the law inaugurated in 2012, the decree signed by the judges of this small provincial court – with minimal staff in the middle of a zone with one of the highest densities of mafia and criminal activity in all of Europe – has established that¹⁰¹

the entirety of conditions summarized and the serious risks related to the choice of Mrs A. to be admitted into the witness protection program require, therefore, an acceptance of the request from P.M.M. to entrust the offspring in subject exclusively to the mother and declare, in an urgent and precautionary measure, the removal of G.'s parental rights, with the consequence that every decision concerning both the acts of ordinary and extraordinary administration in the interest of minors V., S. and M. – including the one to accept the measure of proposed protection and to enact the related requirements – should be taken exclusively by the same A., without the need to consult the other parent.

There is no doubt that this extraordinary decision cannot be shared by the two parents and moreover might expose the mother and the children to serious emotional pressures and, furthermore, to risks to their safety, both for the criminal affiliation of the spouse as well as for the not unlikely possibility of an uncontrolled reaction by the father G. on account of his dangerous personality.

For the sake of completeness, it would not be superfluous to emphasize that the ablative measure is also justified by reason of the above-mentioned behavior of G., which represents a blatant contempt for the basic rules of upbringing and caretaking of his children, and therefore substantiates serious violations of obligations related to his parental responsibilities, with an abuse of its powers and consequent harm to the psychological and physical health of his children.

and drugs on her own person. The *Carabinieri* discovered them on her. They arrested her. She stayed silent.” (Andreana Illiano, cit., 6 October 2015).

¹⁰¹ Decree no. 32/15, R.G. Vol. Lega. of 29.09.2015, cit., p. 4-5.

In other words, the systematic activity of indoctrinating his son into the mafia – which consisted in having exposed the young V. to the use of arms, having him assist with criminal activities and making him a participant in the criminal aims of the organization – has led *ictu oculi* to a severe impairment of the child’s psycho-physical health, so much so as to utilize the extremes of abusive conduct for the purposes of the present civil procedure (a circumstance that, under the profile of a possible criminal offense, should be assessed by the competent office of the Prosecutor).

Indeed, there is no doubt that the minor V. is to be considered a real victim of repeated mistreatment by the Father who, by involving the child in the illegal business of his criminal association in order to indoctrinate the child, showed absolutely no care for the irreparable damage to his delicate emotional needs as well as for the risks to his own safety.

In order to save the children, the law allowed the mother A. to leave Calabria and move to a protected location where she could rebuild her life and the lives of her three children, and it revoked the parental rights from the father G., imprisoned for 416 bis, who, due to harmful conduct aggravated by the repeated commission of criminal acts in which he also involved his own children, was deemed completely incapable of upholding their rights guaranteed by the Italian Constitution,¹⁰² by the Convention on the Rights of the Child of New York,¹⁰³ and

¹⁰² The constitutional coverage is ensured by Art. 2: “The Republic recognizes and guarantees the inviolable rights of man, both as an individual and in social formations where he may develop his personality, and requires the fulfillment of the imperative duties of political, economic and social solidarity”; by Art. 30: “It is the duty and right of parents to support, instruct and raise their children”, but “in cases of inability on the part of the parents, the law provides for the fulfilment of their duties”; and again by Art. 31, second paragraph: “The Republic protects maternity, childhood, and youth by promoting the institutions necessary for such purposes”, according to which it is precisely the task of the State – and of its own institutional branches – to protect childhood and youth by promoting the institutions necessary for this purpose, and to intervene in order to protect the physical and social health of minors, through measures aimed at safeguarding real life opportunities that allow for an actual integration (or reintegration) into the social fabric by restoring collective shared values.

¹⁰³ As regards the international conventions, of absolute importance – among others – is the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, signed in New York in 1989 and ratified by Italy with the law n. 176 of 1991, in which it states: “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” (Art. 3, paragraph 1), which can result in separation from the parents “in a particular case such as one involving abuse or neglect of the child”, (Art. 9), whose “education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own; and the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin” (Art. 29).

by the European Convention on Human Rights (C.E.D.U.).¹⁰⁴ The Juvenile Court of Reggio officially revokes his parental rights, given that

in applying the above-mentioned national and supranational regulatory principles, one can affirm that the mafia model of childrearing – such as the one adopted by G. – violates the fundamental rights of the child (including that of receiving a responsible and empowering upbringing), it being the source of serious moral, psychological, and sometimes physical prejudices [to the detriment of the children].¹⁰⁵

This is the reason why the international and national sources, while decreeing the child's right to grow and be brought up within their own family, also allow for a separation, albeit temporary, from one or both parents when it is necessary for the best interests of the child. Particularly in the case law of the C.E.D.U. concerning Art. 8,¹⁰⁶ it is consistently affirmed that the deprivation of parental rights represents a particular measure of vast import to be applied only in the case of exceptional circumstances justified by an overriding requirement that matches the best interests of the minor.

These considerations are necessary to understand the scope of the operation of Di Bella and his colleagues, in addition to the hostile reactions that this operation has aroused and continues to arouse, exposing the Court and the Juvenile Prosecutor of Reggio Calabria to constant threats and misleading criticism: they have been accused of deporting minors, of seizing children. In a speech to the Senate of the Republic in Rome on November 24, 2015, Di Bella – beginning from its assumption that “the first victims of the ‘Ndrangheta are their own children”, and revealing the fragility and the unspeakable suffering of these emotionally isolated children (often their grandparents, parents, and siblings are in jail, or fugitives, or have been killed in ambushes), which is part and parcel of being mafiosi – stated,

¹⁰⁴ The *European Convention on Human Rights* (C.E.D.U.), was signed in Strasbourg on January 25, 1996, and ratified by Italy with Law n. 77 of March 20, 2003. According to this Convention: “Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

¹⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ C.E.D.U., Article 8: “Right to respect for private and family life 1. Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence. 2. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

with all the force of his grace and intellect, that in spite of criticism and smear campaigns:

the measures adopted do not have a punitive logic and are not against “the family”, but are issued for the protection of children and, in any case, cease to be in effect on the eighteenth year of age or upon fulfilment of probation period in the penal process. In addition, they are allowed contact and to seek alliances with family members who decide to accept the path of rehabilitation or show signs of reformation, while with others – i.e. those who refuse to change – the appropriate relational modalities must be found. From the perspective of the legal framework, I wish to assure you that we are not playing fast and loose with the law, but rather we are moving within a solid regulatory, constitutional and internationally agreed upon framework.¹⁰⁷

To clarify what Di Bella means when he says: “We are not playing fast and loose with the law”, we must first see what the Italian law states concerning the establishment called the Juvenile Court [Tribunale per i minorenni; T.M.]:

The T.M. shall exercise jurisdiction in criminal, civil and administrative matters in the spirit of realizing the best interests of the minor (see Art. 3, subparagraph 1, Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, ratified by Italy with Law 176 of 1991, which has ruled: “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.”

And then we should look more closely at the details of its jurisdiction.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Senate, cit., 2015, p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ The powers of the Juvenile Court pertain to three categories: criminal, civil, and administrative. Criminal jurisdiction covers cases where a minor is at least fourteen years of age and is accused of having committed an offense. At this point the Public Prosecutor requests the initiation of a criminal trial which is quite different from that meant for adults. In fact, the court must decide not only if the child has committed the crime of which he/she is accused, but also if he/she had sufficient mental capabilities to understand that he/she was violating the law. The court must therefore get to know the personality of the child and his/her family environment, and for this reason there is a special social service agency linked to the Ministry of Justice. Among the general principles of the juvenile criminal procedure code is the following: “4. The obligation to assess the personality of the minor (the conditions and personal, family, and environmental resources) in order to ensure his/her social reintegration by means of services or persons who know the child or with the collaboration of experts, but in an informal manner. These services can also be used even if the accused has become an adult during the process of the trial, and they are included in the dossier of the preliminary hearing.” The civil sector relates to interventions in matters of parental rights over the child. Among the primary civil proceedings are those of control over the exercising of parental rights, Articles 330 and ff. c.c. and the regulation of biological parental rights, Art. 317/B c.c. Finally there is the administrative jurisdiction that relates to minors with problems of

In terms of criminal jurisdiction:

In criminal matters the T.M. has exclusive jurisdiction: it adjudicates all crimes committed by persons who, at the time of the deed, were aged between fourteen and eighteen years; a minor below the age of fourteen is considered by law not guilty due to diminished capacity to understand and act willfully (Art. 97 c.p.).

And within the framework of the juvenile criminal procedure code, among the general principles is the following:

4) it is the obligation of the public prosecutor and judge to acquire information about the conditions and personal, family, social and environmental resources of the child in order to ascertain the liability and the degree of responsibility, to assess the social relevance of the deed as well as to enact the appropriate criminal measures and implement possible civil procedures. Social relations can be used even if the defendant became an adult during the process of the trial (Art. 9 DPR n. 448/88).

In terms of civil jurisdiction:

Therefore T. M. oversees primarily interventions for the protection of minors in cases where the parents do not properly fulfill or fulfill in any way their duty to their children (Article 147 of the civil code establishes these duties as those of maintenance, upbringing and education).

The Court may place limits on the exercising of parental rights by issuing orders to the parents of the minor and activating the intervention of social services to support and oversee the quality of life of the child within their family (Art. 333 of the civil code). The Court can also remove the minor from the family home (Articles 330, 333 and 336 of the civil code) and entrust him/her temporarily to another family or agency or even to individual persons (Articles 2 and

social maladjustment and with behavioral difficulties. For these minors the court can order measures of educational support. Very often this type of intervention can be carried out in accordance with the procedural rules of the civil jurisdiction. The methods falling in the administrative jurisdiction are governed by Articles 25 and 25/B R.D.L. 20.7.1934 n. 1404 and succ. mod. (See www.servizilegali.org/doc/II%20Tribunale%20per%20i%20Minorenni.pdf). It should be noted that: “The civil proceedings of the juvenile court are initiated at the request of one or both of the parents, or at the request of the Public Prosecutor. Some cases (e.g. request of authorization for marriage) begin at the request of the minor him/herself. In the case of neglect or in matters of serious urgency the court can begin the process in the office and take interim measures. Normally, however, the general rule applies, according to which the judge should not proceed automatically but only at the request of the persons entitled to do so. The law does not include social services among these. Therefore, alerts from social services that are received by the Court are transmitted (except in cases of serious urgency) to the public ministry, so that it can assess whether or not to implement the corresponding procedure” (*ibidem*).

4 of law n. 184/83). In the most serious cases, it may declare parents to have forfeited their parental rights over their children (Art. 330 of the civil code), and when the child is in a situation of moral and material neglect, it may declare the status of adoptability and integrate the child definitively into another family, by arranging the cessation of the minor's relations with his/her family of origin (Articles 8 and following of Law n. 184/83).

In terms of administrative jurisdiction:

The T.M. also has an administrative jurisdiction which concerns educational interventions to aid adolescents in difficulty and with irregular behavior (Articles 25 and 25B of the R.D. 1404/34 and successive modifications).

In all spheres of its jurisdiction, an important characteristic of the T.M.'s activity is to avail itself of the collaboration of social assistance services and provincial healthcare services; intervention on behalf of the minor or for families is therefore not meant to be punitive, but rather a proactive measure to better the quality of life and family relationships through the activation of the services required in a given situation.¹⁰⁹

In order to better illustrate all of these elements, particularly the last point, and to examine more carefully the various positive aspects of Di Bella's project, we must return to the case of R.C.

2.7 R.C.

His letter to the *Corriere della Sera* brings to light the positive outcomes of reintegrating minors into a more appropriate and stable environment, by entrusting them, if necessary (if even the mother and other relatives are unreliable or incapable of caring for them), to other families or Social Services until they have reached eighteen years of age. The intervention of the Court becomes necessary when the behavior of the parents or of the broader family environment affects the minor's development due to the aberrant model embraced by the mafia. As we already know, in fact, this model is founded on the principles of intimidation, of prevarication, and the practice of physical violence on others, including the sacrifice of one's most valuable asset – one's life.

¹⁰⁹ See the official website of the Ministry of Justice, www.tribmin.reggiocalabria.giustizia.it.

Let us see why the Juvenile Court of Reggio had to resort to the measure that led to the (temporary) separation of a child from his parent. First of all, there is a background of petty crime.

How did R. come under the radar of the Court?

Because at the age of sixteen years he was discovered, with other friends, near a damaged vehicle belonging to the local railway police. The trial for theft and damage concluded with an acquittal due to lack of evidence. However, the youth's life story, as it emerged during the investigation, was such that it caused the Juvenile District Attorney (Public Prosecutor Francesca Stilla) to request an urgent injunction, issued immediately by the Court, by which R. was relocated to a community facility outside of Calabria, in order to protect him and try to save him. Save and protect him from what?

We find the answer in the July 19, 2012 decree, which outlines the family situation of a boy who had dropped out of school (public and mandatory in Italy), who spent nights in the company of known criminals, who had no doubts about what he would become, following in the footsteps of his brothers and father.

This is the summary of his life: at a very young age he lost his father, who was killed in a mafia ambush. His brothers were imprisoned for murder and mafia association, one of them doing hard time (41 bis). The mother was completely unable to control her children's dangerous behavior. These were the reasons why R. (Class 1996, today twenty-one years of age) was "at serious risk of criminal behavior."¹¹⁰ The fact that he belonged to a mafia family was well established beyond any reasonable doubt;¹¹¹ therefore, the Court decreed that "the conditions are sufficient for issuing – with urgency and *inaudita altera parte* – a measure limiting parental rights" and that "as a corollary to the above ruling, it is essential to entrust the child to Social Services" with

a mandate to relocate him immediately into a community facility suitable to his needs and to be located outside the region of Calabria (with the clarification that the facility must have staff members who are professionally qualified in dealing with problems similar to those noted in this youth and must provide at the same time a true cultural alternative); this solution appears to be the only practicable means of saving C. from an unavoidable fate (as also mentioned in the report by the Ministerial Community of Reggio Calabria dated March 9, 2012, **wherein it finds in the minor's attitude "a certain resignation to a**

¹¹⁰ The decree of the Juvenile Court in Reggio Calabria (President Roberto Di Bella, Judge Francesca di Landro, honorary judges Davide Maria Furforoso and Annunziata Rizzi), 19.7.2012, pp. 1-3, p. 1.

¹¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 1-2.

predetermined life”) and, at the same time, of allowing the child to experience alternative cultural contexts and a different life from that of his negative upbringing, in the hope that he can free himself from the parental models he has assimilated thus far.¹¹²

The decision of the Court initially petrifies the mother, who resists this outcome. However, once she understands that the measure is not punitive but directed to save her son and keep him from the same fate as his father or brothers, she agrees, in order to “avoid more drastic measures”, to follow the “provisions necessary for recovering her parental rights and taking the proper approach with her youngest son.”¹¹³ As Mancini concludes, it is possible that the mother has acted

in the – unspoken – hope of avoiding what seemed even to her an inevitable fate and which she does not seem to have the resources to counteract.¹¹⁴

But an even more surprising fact and harbinger of hope:

paradoxically, even the older brothers of the child encourage the mother to follow this “new path” recommended by “a judge who for once shows some interest in them.”¹¹⁵

It is quite surprising that even the older brothers, already entrenched in their criminal fate, glimpsed and wished for this glimmer of hope for their younger brother. This glimmer had been denied to them, but it was obviously a possibility nonetheless. R. was welcomed into a small Sicilian community. After the initially overwhelming impact, he realized that someone, for the first time in his life, truly cared about his wellbeing. In order to help him, highly trained professionals such as psychologist Enrico Interdonato and social worker of the Ministry of Justice Maria Baronello, of the USSM (Office for Juvenile Social Services) of Messina, which works with the association Addiopizzo Messina alongside Don Ciotti’s Libera. Thanks to their support, R., who at the beginning of his new path tried to make himself invisible to others and to himself,

in the course of time has participated in the events organized by anti-mafia organizations in the region in which he resided.¹¹⁶

He also

¹¹² Ivi, p. 2.

¹¹³ Ivi, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Michela Mancini, *Dalle madri ai figli. Se la ‘ndrangheta perde i suoi soldati*, cit., 2014.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁶ Michela Mancini, cit., 2015, p. 35.

began to volunteer in a facility that cares for underprivileged children, helping them to do their homework and playing with them. He has also returned to his studies. Periodically he went to visit his mother; their paths moved forward in parallel [...], their wish for change was no longer only a dream.¹¹⁷

Upon reaching eighteen years of age R. left the Sicilian community and was reunited with his mother, determined to continue on this new road. Today he is working abroad in the field of food services.

According to the statistical data which I consulted, currently almost none of the children subject to these measures, now living their lives as adults, has thus far committed offenses, except for two. One is R., who had a DASPO,¹¹⁸ a disciplinary measure for sporting events (for spraying pepper spray during a game). This is an administrative rather than a criminal penalty, which should certainly be avoided, but is nevertheless quite different from those acts which his brothers had committed at the same age, they at twenty years old already imprisoned for mafia-related crimes. The other offender, a nineteen-year-old whose relapse is criminally more serious, was arrested on October 10, 2017 for the transport of fifteen kilos of marijuana.¹¹⁹

The case of R. exemplifies the aims and practices of the juvenile court of Reggio, thanks to the implementation of the protocol and project Free to choose: to help mafia children in disastrous family conditions find their own way (good or bad, as it is always a question of free will), by shielding them from the unquestioning absorption of mafia culture, from the negative validation of deviant cultural models, from the manipulation of family and adults in their home environment, and by offering a new path of respect for the values and laws of the State and of civil society.

The juvenile judiciary of Reggio has in fact initiated an action whose ultimate aim is to transform the child-soldiers of the ‘Ndrangheta into free citizens, capable of deciding their own future for themselves. The initial, albeit partial, results of the measures issued in the last five years are encouraging. Based on the various cases heard (as of today approximately forty, according to Di Bella’s estimate) – some

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁸ DASPO is an acronym for ‘prohibited entry to sporting events’, the title of Law n. 401 of December 13, 1989, which aims to combat violence in sporting venues (www.treccani.it/vocabolario).

¹¹⁹ <http://www.corrieredellacalabria.it/cronaca/item/62599-in-auto-con-15-chili-di-marijuana-a-cosoleto-3-arresti/62599-in-auto-con-15-chili-di-marijuana-a-cosoleto-3-arresti> (October 10, 2017).

of which have required, as in the case of R., the provisional removal from the family environment – they have already achieved significant results:

the minors have resumed attendance of school, which had been interrupted, have performed community service, and have followed the rehabilitative path to legality organized by juvenile social service workers, sometimes in collaboration with other magistrates of the district, with representatives of the police force and with volunteers (psychologists, educators, etc.) of associations engaged in combatting organized crime: in essence, the children have shown their potential which had been suppressed by their deleterious home environment.¹²⁰

The action of the Reggio Court, following the agreement of July 1, 2017, will become national law. The legislative process toward this goal is now underway. At the end of October 2017 the CSM (High Council of the Judiciary), moving forward from the praxis of this initiative, requested that the legislature change the penal code by introducing the accessory penalty of forfeiture of parental rights for those convicted of mafia association, when this association involves their children.¹²¹ The request is contained in a resolution developed by the sixth Commission and, on November 14, 2017, was discussed by the full committee of Palazzo dei Marescialli.¹²² Among the recipients were the presidents of the Senate and the House, the Parliamentary Anti-mafia Commission and the Minister of Justice. Hoping to see Di Bella's legal tool quickly become law, the next step will be to propose it as a European Directive. Because if it is true that the 'Ndrangheta is one of the most successful global phenomena in existence – considering its (already mentioned) annual revenue – it is equally true that limited national anti-mafia laws are not enough to counteract it; what is urgently needed are international European and global measures of a broader scope.¹²³ It is in this

¹²⁰ Roberto Di Bella, speech to the Senate, cit., 2015, p. 3

¹²¹ The CSM, whose task it is to take an active part in the procedure by proposing explicit rules into the civil and criminal codes, fully supports the course of action of the Juvenile Courts of southern Italy which began in Reggio Calabria, “maintaining the ‘mistreatment’ of mafia families toward their children to be equal to those where a parent is a drug addict or who uses physical violence: removal of parental rights is a measure of *extrema ratio*, write the advisers, but it can be indispensable to “protect the child from injury which comes from the violation of his or her right to be brought up in respect of the constitutional principles and values of civil coexistence.” The CSM calls for a reinforcement of the tools at the disposal of the juvenile courts and stresses the need for the measures affecting parental rights to be accompanied by requirements and rehabilitation projects that – at least in the first instance – involve the entire nuclear family” (see “Il Csm: una legge per revocare la patria potestà ai boss”, www.ilmessaggero.it, Thursday, October 26, 2017. See also Gigi Di Fiore, “‘Clan, legge per revocare la patria potestà’: il Csm chiede nuove norme”, www.ilmattino.it, Saturday, October 28, 2017).

¹²² The official seat of the CSM in Rome.

¹²³ On this point see the countless appeals of Nicola Gratteri in many of his public interviews (on the news and talkshows).

perspective that we must understand the significance of the struggle between a modern-day David (Di Bella) and a global Goliath (the 'Ndrangheta).

If the case of R.C., despite the DASPO, shows us the benefits of the difficult process of temporary removal from a destructive family environment, the case of D. allows us to enter into the midst of the very difficult purgatorial phase that many mafia children must overcome in order to detach themselves from the mafia.

So many bitter realities within this discourse show that the law, *dura lex sed lex* as the Romans knew well, is not easily implemented and does not lead to certain, immediate happiness and wellbeing for those who it has helped to break free of terrible life conditions. The process of disentangling oneself from the mafia has many things in common with that of exile described by Edward Said:¹²⁴ separation from the places and people in one's life, separation from loved ones (no matter how bad or criminal), being uprooted from one's origins, from one's customs, from one's recognized, recognizable and never questioned way of living. The geographic transfer, the transplantation of the self into an unknown elsewhere, the nostalgia, the sense of loss, the feeling of being dispossessed by one's life and by one's self. Along with this, the name change, the loss of one's closest relatives from infancy. All of this, which takes place under the system of protection for minors at risk of mafia involvement, requires a huge amount of effort and flexibility. But if the knee-jerk reaction would be to say 'no' to the State which intervenes in place of the parents, this action causing revolt and, not infrequently, resentment and hatred (serious threats included) demonstrated against Di Bella's operation and that of his court,¹²⁵ on the other hand, common sense and a sense of justice reveal that these are cases of "desperate circumstances calling for desperate measures." And if the list of reasons for this exile cause pain, far worse are the family conditions to which these mafia children are condemned, through no fault of their own.

The case of the brothers D. and N. is emblematic in this regard. Let us take a closer look.

¹²⁴ Edward Said, *Reflections on exile*, in *Reflections on exile And Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 137-149.

¹²⁵ During their work in Reggio Calabria, President Di Bella and the Court and Juvenile District Attorney's office, received written threats, toy guns deposited at night in front of the entrance gate of the Court by people disguised as military officers, and bullets left on the premises of the Social Services office. They had also been victims of a smear campaign in the press, in which they were accused of 'deporting' children from their families. On the other hand, marches had been organized in support of Di Bella and his court.

2.8 D. and N.

The case of D. is complex because it also involves his sister, N., and his mother: an entire family which had to start life over in a new location in search of a better future. And this case is important for the purposes of this book, due to the double misfortune characterizing it, which is clearly underscored in Macri's criticism (page 26) of Social Services' inefficiencies and failure to take preventive action to protect the child D.

The boy not only comes from a detrimental mafia family environment, but if Social Services had honored the request made by the Juvenile Prosecutor in 2010, which called for D.'s removal from his family (both parents had just been arrested for mafia crimes) in order to begin rehabilitation, he would not have been involved, at sixteen years old, in criminal activities well beyond his years, which led him to spend three and a half years of his young life in a juvenile prison. In 2010 Di Bella had not yet arrived at the Juvenile Court of Reggio, and after his arrival in 2012 he completely changed the rules of the game. This included, as we have seen, the cases of D. and N., both involved – to a varying degree – in the illegal activities of their family *cosca*: the case of D. resulted in a conviction according to Art. 416 bis, while N. was entrusted to foster care for a period of time.

The family situation, which is evident from the respective files of these two siblings, is depressing. Their father is a boss of one of most powerful *cosche* of Piana di Reggio Calabria, as noted in an article from the online newspaper New Cosenza in March 2008:¹²⁶

Back home for the Easter holiday, the fugitive R.S., wanted since 2002, was arrested

He returned home to spend Easter with his family, but was caught and arrested by officers of Reggio Calabria's mobile command unit. R.S.'s years in hiding are over: a man whom investigators consider a key figure in the *cosca* [omissis] and wanted since 2002. The man was convicted for mafia crimes and must serve the remainder of his sentence.

And here the article lays out the extent of family dysfunction into which D. and N. were born:

¹²⁶ www.nuovacosenza.com/cs/08/marzo/html.

R.S., 43 years of age, a fugitive for the past five years and wanted to serve the remainder of his eighteen-month sentence, was found in a bunker within a woodshed on the ground floor of the [...] house where his family resides. Inside the bunker State Police agents of the Commissariat of [omissis], directed by C.P. and coordinated by Deputy Chief Renato Panvino, confiscated a pair of night vision goggles, a scanner, listening device detectors, closed-circuit television cameras and two multipurpose knives. “The capture of R.S.”, said Reggio’s commissioner Santi Gioffrè in a meeting with journalists, “came after an intense investigation that led to his identification, removing any possibility for him to flee.” R.S. is the brother of the better known D.S. and G.S., both condemned to life imprisonment, and of C.S., out on parole from Fossombrone prison for several years and under special surveillance, the latter present at the time of the police raid on the house. All are sons of A.S., who died of natural causes and who, in the 1980s, had instigated a bloody feud for control of the criminal [omissis] against the opposing families of [omissis]. D.S. and G.S. were sentenced to life imprisonment for the triple murder of A., V., and L. [omissis], which occurred in the mid-80s on a farm in the Ponte Vecchio area of [omissis]. Furthermore, the S. brothers were accused of the attempted murder of three police officers, G.A., G.V., and A.I. During the press conference, investigators also mentioned some incidences of extortion that the S. brothers had used against contractors, and other crimes in connection with the family B. [omissis]. Two warrants were issued by the DDA [District Anti-Mafia Directive] of Reggio Calabria against C. and T., the brother and sister of R., a fugitive since 2002 and arrested by the police in a bunker constructed in the family’s home [omissis]. The family members of the fugitive are accused of willful non-compliance with the law. The arrest of R.S., wanted to serve the remainder of his sentence, was preceded by an ‘intense investigation’ by the coordinator of the District Antimafia Directive, Salvatore Boemi, and the Deputy Prosecutor Roberto Placido Di Palma, who oversees investigations of the crime families of the Piana di Gioia Tauro area. The State Police, according to rumors, would be examining some documents of particular investigative value found in the house of S. Also involved in the inquest was Assistant District Attorney Joseph Lombardo.

Father, grandparents, uncles, aunts, relatives, friends and acquaintances, all participate in crimes of every type: disregard for the law, illegal activities, extortion, feuds, attempted murders, murders. And, as a consequence: prosecutions, fugitive status, trials, sentences, imprisonment, life without parole. At that time the mother of D. and N. was in prison as well. Here we find the particular situation of the girl,

deprived of both parents' support, both imprisoned for serious mafia crimes, [and whose] situation has worsened as a result of her brother D.'s preventive custody in prison.¹²⁷

The precautionary measure was for the crime committed by D. (see p. 26-27), for which

the girl N. was also investigated, albeit for a marginal role, against whom the investigative results [...] showed a constant and harmful influence caused by the family.¹²⁸

The “influence caused by the family” is not a vague assertion of the Reggio judiciary. The judgment of April 11, 2014, relative to the case of D., comprises a 59-page file, densely written in single space type, which details a ten-year sequela of blood and horror: the history of the *cosca* to which D. owes his name, with all the sentences and decrees involving many relatives, friends and affiliates in a well-oiled mafia machine founded on abuse of power, power, violence, threats, extortion, feuds, murders. The war between D.'s *cosca* and the enemy *cosche* for dominance over the same territory with all its trafficking and movements, has caused more than fifty deaths in the past ten years. The murderous cycle is repeated over and over: alleged offense (for example: opening a bar in disputed territory), assault and physical elimination of a member of the rival family, and then murderous revenge by the other side, and so forth. Counteractions by the State – which in recent years has implemented four operations (Cosa Mia I, II, III, and Orso) against the ‘Ndrangheta in this region – have upset the *cosca*'s structure and imprisoned many of D.'s family members while confiscating the family's property. This includes: the family home (a true landmark for the whole area and undisputed symbol of the family's power), property and real estate in Calabria and in other regions of Italy, companies, and holdings, amounting to several million euros.

This stage populated by mafia criminals, thieves, and murderers with the faces of their grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts, family friends and acquaintances, all members of the ‘Ndrangheta, is the one that gave birth to D. and N. From the police reports based on interceptions and cross-references, it appears that, among many other illegal activities carried out by the *cosca*, even the family home was a product of theft, deception, threats and extortion against the previous owners and official landlords.¹²⁹ How could these two children have lived in a house inhabited by such a family? What could they have seen, heard, and experienced from their

¹²⁷ The decree of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, 23.1.2014, cit., p. 2.

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁹ www.pianainforma.it/cronaca/palmi-sequestrato-palazzo.

earliest years? What values could these parents, relatives, friends and acquaintances have taught them? As adolescents, both the brother and his younger sister took part in the illegal activities of the adults. One day, while other families were celebrating the Easter holidays, they witnessed law enforcement enter their house and capture their fugitive father, hidden in a bunker in their house and who, at the time of writing, must serve another twelve years of 41 bis in a maximum security prison – while their relatives (including two brothers) were sentenced to life for murder and incarcerated in other maximum security prisons – , and they saw the capture of their mother, sentenced to five years for false registration of assets with the aggravating circumstance of mafia membership (now free after serving her sentence).

After the arrest of their parents – while the sister, in their absence, is shamefully exploited and used by the adults, legally inculpable due to her young age – it is the sixteen-year-old D., now undertaking the role of temporary breadwinner to replace his imprisoned father, who must go around beating, threatening, extorting in the name of his family, accompanied by a henchman able to drive the car, given that as a minor he could not do so without attracting suspicion.

But who had ever taught D. to oppose the dictates of his family and to choose another path? Who had ever offered him the possibility of growing up without becoming a mafioso? To go to school, get a diploma and learn a trade other than bullying, terrorizing his sister and enemies, beating, threatening, and extorting?

It might sound overly deterministic, but his fate, like that of many other mafia children, was decided from the moment of conception.

The same applies to his sister N.'s coerced involvement in terms of gender differences due to mafia culture. Small and female, powerless to counteract her family's orders and lifestyle, found to be in possession of a large sum of extortion payments, at sixteen years she confessed candidly (and implicitly) the family's business:

I dissociate myself from this extortion activity. I try to stay away from these things because it does not interest me. I am no stranger to the activities of my family.¹³⁰

She therefore demonstrates knowledge of the 'Ndrangheta's rationale and eventually tells the person in charge of overseeing the foster home in which had been placed: "I shouldn't have talked, they'll make me pay."¹³¹

¹³⁰ The decree of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, January 23, 2014, pp. 1-9, p. 3.

¹³¹ Ivi, p. 4.

From this we understand that she feared retaliation, which is the norm in her situation. At the same time, the child, with two parents and a brother in prison, has also admitted: “Mamma always said to tell the truth during an interrogation.”¹³² This statement was used as evidence in favor of the mother who, in fact, during her five-year sentence, agreed to rehabilitation in order to regain parental rights to her two children at the end of the sentence.

While their father, still loved by both children, is now doing hard time in prison and making efforts to reach out to his children and wife despite their separation, the mother and the two children have been reunited, in another city, in another part of Italy. The association Libera is taking care of them. While in prison, the mother understood that she needed to change and found her way back to her children. The father, an ex-boss reduced to powerlessness, has shown his acceptance of the family’s rehabilitation and social reintegration, promoted and protected by the State, the judiciary, Social Services, and volunteer anti-mafia associations, without which all this would not be feasible.

The case of D. and N. (with noted differences) reveals the steps of a difficult journey: their childhood and adolescence lived not as they should be, violence and oppression as their daily bread, omertà, contempt for the State, the suffering and pain of their victims, their own suffering and pain and that of their loved ones, trials, sentences, convictions, prison, relocations, family homes, probation, a sense of abandonment, of being lost, of constant distance from their family, nostalgia, hopelessness.

It is not easy to be born, to become, to be the son of a mafia boss.

From the childhood of V. and his two siblings, whose protection and relocation the mother requested from the State; to R.’s reaching adulthood far from home, thanks to Social Services and anti-mafia associations, and finally returning to his own rehabilitated mom; to the troubled adolescence of D. and his sister N., ending with their reunification with their rehabilitated mother and relocation to a new area. We followed these three important cases to exemplify the subject matter dealt with in this book, but the minors we called V., R., D. and N. are not isolated cases.

The voluminous files on dozens of juvenile cases, which the Court of Reggio handles daily, record the testimonies of many other, similar voices united in a choral crescendo of oppression and a search for justice. The work of the juvenile judiciary is necessary to help these mafia children find an alternative for the future. It represents escape from an inevitable fate imposed on and absorbed by

¹³² Ivi, p. 7.

them even before they are able to understand and voice their own desires; a fate that, if measures are not taken in time, will ruin them for life.

CHAPTER TWO: *PASSION*



At present the Court of Reggio is handling an ever-increasing number of cases involving mafia children, both male and female. Some are accompanied by their mothers, other not. Some are removed from the custody of one parent (usually the father, doing hard time in prison), some from both parents. Some speak openly on their own, others' words are reported by their mothers, as in the case mentioned at the opening of this book, in which the mother told Di Bella of her own twelve-year-old son who wished for a Kalashnikov to kill him. In this chapter we will examine, based on Court documents, some of the young and unwilling protagonists of nefarious situations and events far beyond their scope. It will be a painful *passion* comprised of stations of discomfort, torment, and violence which ends with prison or premature death and which, in every case, outlines a life of hell.

1. Murders

P. was not even sixteen years old when he became a murderer. It began with the murder of an arcade hall owner [*omissis*], a crime he committed for a trivial debt of twenty-one Euro which the young man owed the victim. In the interrogation on February 16, 2011, P. tried to exculpate himself by arguing in poor Italian that:

“It came into my head that I had a gun and then I shot him, but only because I was drunk [...] While he was going down, I grabbed him by the sweater, I pulled out the gun without thinking [...] but I fired, because I didn't even know how to load it, maybe it had a shot in the barrel ... I ... I don't really remember.”¹

The boy appeals to his own unawareness and weakness of memory. Months later, during the interrogation on June 6, 2011, he gave a different version of events in which he admitted that in his neighborhood it is typical to carry a weapon:

¹ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Sentence, December 21, 2011, signed by judge Roberto Di Bella, not yet President of the Court, pp. 1-31, p. 5-6.

“In the area of [omissis] there are lots of them on the streets, even among kids my age ... they circulate these refurbished guns ... it’s the norm here.”²

And, with regard to the facts and the cause of the murder, P. reiterated that he didn’t remember well, but because of the victim’s refusal to change fifty Euro for him without first receiving the twenty-one Euro owed, he felt offended:

“He said to me: ‘No, I won’t exchange your money. First you have to pay me your debt and... and then I’ll change the money’. I felt offended..., it was a lack of respect and I wanted to be tough ... and then I pulled out the gun to be tough,, to show that I was really pissed off, I loaded the gun [...] I fired and I definitely pulled the trigger.”³

The results of expert evaluations found that P. is fully capable of understanding and partially able express his own will. According to the diagnosis of child neuropsychiatrist Maria Zirilli, the child has a borderline personality disorder:

“a distortion of the personality that is characterized by a poor integration of self-identity, of life lived in a vacuum, of anger and aggressive behavior.”⁴

Such a pathology would not have compromised the child’s awareness and, despite his altered state, he was able to understand the risks of his action; conversely, this disturbance would have led to “an inadequate capacity to reflect, a confused impulsivity he cannot control.”⁵ The report underscores that if

the child were to return into normal society, he would not be able to lead a healthy life. He himself, in many passages, declares that he does not want to return to his usual life, which he perceives as dangerous, with people involved and in the social context to which he belonged and where he feels himself to be potentially dangerous.⁶

This statement shows that the child, given his “personality and dangerousness”, must be closely contained in prison for a sufficient period of time and with parallel psychotherapeutic treatment to be carried out in a juvenile correctional facility. The sentence of December 21, 2011 – while taking account of the overall assessment of the youth’s partial culpability, despite his acting “with total disregard for the victim’s life”⁷ and “with total indifference to his fate, with

² Ivi, p. 8.

³ Ivi, p. 9.

⁴ Ivi, p. 10

⁵ Maria Zirilli, *ibidem*.

⁶ Ivi, p. 11.

⁷ Ivi, p. 19

conditional intent and impetus”⁸ – declares him “guilty of the charged offenses” and condemns him to “a sentence of thirteen years imprisonment.”⁹ Judge Di Bella’s words in the ruling regarding P. help us to better understand this child’s background and what pushed him to kill:

There is no doubt that the child’s developmental and family history has scarred his personality, making him violent and antisocial [...]. The documented psychological and criminal progression – even if exacerbated by his borderline personality disorder – allowed the child to internalize the negative cultural values of his home environment, characterized by a precise code of honor – where *omertà*, personal respect and recognition on the part of the other are crucial aspects – and where violence is an acceptable means of resolving personal disputes.¹⁰

Di Bella’s words emphasize the young murderer’s total adherence to the primitive values of his upbringing, allowing us to understand why the motive was “far from irrational, but instead due to a mistaken sense of honor”¹¹ (a circumstance that is very relevant to the degree of intent), and gives an idea of the foundations of P.’s world.

2. Illegal Trafficking: Drugs

On February 7, 2013, the juvenile court issues a decree for the then sixteen-year-old G., born in 1995 in Reggio Calabria, and previously sentenced (later suspended) to eight months in prison for dealing drugs. The decree signed by Di Bella was necessary, given

the behavioral issues and obstinate adherence to criminal activity, despite a clear awareness of the unlawfulness of this conduct.¹²

The youth represents the ideal mafia-child prototype which the Court of Reggio is working to dismantle: a child condemned from birth to unquestioning adherence to mafia propaganda mafia established by his family and environment. His father was condemned to 41 bis. This arrest and conviction had caused a severe state of anxiety in the young man who was prescribed pharmacological therapy along with psychological support. His mother is evidently unable to control her son’s deviant

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Ivi, p. 30.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 13.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 23.

¹² Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree, February 7, 2013, signed by Di Bella, pp. 1-6, p. 2.

behavior and unable to guide him, according to Social Services, toward a respect for the values and rules that would have disentangled him from a criminal life. Indeed, the mother never submitted a single request for help or support for the child to the competent authorities. Therefore, the Court, having decided that the young G. – apathetic and indifferent toward available opportunities, a liar,¹³ and a dangerous repeat offender – is in “serious risk of deviance”¹⁴ due in part to the parental situation (father in jail for mafia crimes and mother objectively incapable), has limited both parents’ custodial rights and arranged for G. to spend a period of time in a community under the authority of Social Services. The measure includes an educational path to legality and the social rehabilitation as well as a recovery of parental rights for the mother. The judge, given the urgency and gravity of G.’s situation, remarked that

this solution appears to be the only practicable one to remove the juvenile from an otherwise inevitable fate and at the same time to allow him to experience cultural and social alternatives to that of his upbringing.¹⁵

1. Attempted murders

The case of then fifteen-year-old F. (born in 1997),¹⁶ which documents a “crime of attempted aggravated homicide”,¹⁷ is emblematic of the Mafia world due to the recurrence of identical motives based on a misguided sense of honor and of offenses perceived as insurrection and a lack of respect for themselves or their family members. The juvenile played a lead role in the vindictive aggression against some youths from a town close to his in Aspromonte, who were “guilty” of not having replied satisfactorily to his father when he asked them to help him buy a pack of cigarettes from vending machine in the town’s main square. Perceived by F.’s mother as an unacceptable slight, the boys’ refusal to help her husband was reciprocated with violence against them by family members and friends of the offended party. What exactly did the kids do wrong? They were not deferential and responded that they don’t smoke and therefore don’t know to use the machine, even though one of them, standing a little away, was talking on the

¹³ G., “during the criminal trial, has put forth a manifestly false defense statement”, a reconstruction of events which was “clearly contradicted by converging, obvious and unambiguous investigative findings” (both quotes: *ivi*, p. 1).

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 4.

¹⁶ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree, June 19, 2013, signed by Di Bella, pp. 1-9, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

phone while smoking. The offended party's status? He was a member of one of the most powerful criminal gangs,

a person of bad moral and civil conduct, with many previous criminal convictions even for 'Ndrangheta crimes, both in terms of financial assets and against persons.¹⁸

Therefore, as is the usual reaction in such cases, the rival group of boys moved from acts of intimidation, to physical aggression by one of them (still a juvenile at the time), ending with a stabbing in the woods "in such a manner as to cause potentially lethal injuries."¹⁹ The young F. willingly played an active role in this whole criminal affair, meant to avenge the alleged shame suffered by his father, while "maintaining that he himself was not the perpetrator of the stabbing."²⁰ F. was sentenced to two years and eleven months imprisonment. However, the judge identified some valid reasons to grant a suspended sentence, in spite of the severity of the incident, F.'s dangerous personality, and his false statements in reporting the facts of the stabbing:

"It was dark... I heard a racket and I went to see what was happening. Then it was dark and I could not see anything... I didn't see anyone, I didn't kick or punch anyone."²¹

Various reasons led to the suspension of the sentence: the strong family influence, the natural psychological subordination to his parents, considered inadequate caretakers by the normal standard, and the progress made by the child during his stay in foster care, where he was placed as a result of the revoking of both parents' custodial rights,²² and where, according to the official Social Services report:

"the educational interventions on this type of conduct were immediate and targeted and have had the desired effects. Thus far the juvenile has proved to be open and willing to talk, receptive to stimulations."²³

The case of F. is important. It allows us to understand, firsthand, the actions of the magistrates in Reggio: they are not persecutory, but respectful of the rights of the child, correct in assessing carefully the pros and cons of delicate and difficult

¹⁸ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Sentence, June 19, 2013, pp. 1-28, p. 11.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 14.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 16.

²¹ Ivi, p. 26-27.

²² Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree, June 19, 2013, cit., p. 7.

²³ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Sentence, June 19, 2103, cit., p. 27.

situations. F. benefitted greatly from being removed from the family home for a time. But to better understand these kids' background one must first understand the thought process of the adults who act as their reference model. What we are about to read offers a glimpse of the complexity of being a *mafioso*. The protagonist, in this case, is the father of the young stabbing victim. Di Bella writes:

The particular criminal context in which the crime took place and the authenticity of the statements made by the P.O. [victim] and by his brothers receive further validation from the desperate and disheveled speech of [their] father Z., at the Carabinieri barracks in [omissis] dated August 28, 2012. On this occasion Mr. Z. asked the military to look into the statements made by his sons, who had given investigators a complete reconstruction of the facts. In particular the above showed that in the social-environmental context of the towns of [omissis] and [omissis] in Aspromonte, always characterized by a climate of *omertà* and mistrust of the government, collaboration with law enforcement could expose his family to the risk of extortion: for this reason and in order to avoid blackmail, he asked if his children's statements could be kept out of the official record.²⁴

The father of a boy nearly killed for completely pointless reasons asks the magistrates for an *ex post facto omertà* regarding his own children's statements, including those of the young stabbing victim, in order to avoid the all-encompassing mafia of which he himself is both a perpetrator and a victim. This father was himself a child of the 'Ndrangheta, and what he has become is exactly what Di Bella's method seeks to avoid with regards to today's mafia children.

2. Illicit trafficking: weapons, crimes and power

Against a backdrop of death and power unfolds the story of O., sixteen years old at the time, sentenced to six years imprisonment for a series of mafia-related crimes.²⁵ A quick glimpse at the young O.'s world allows us to enter into the heart of the problem. The roots of the story stem back to the decades-long war for supremacy between rival *'ndrine*. Feuds waged, on both sides, with torrents of blood and countless dead. This time we are in Oppido Mamertina, the stronghold of powerful 'Ndrangheta *cosche* who jockey with and massacre one another, reviving the quintessential medieval conflict between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The most recent episodes of horror date back to 2012 when, in the

²⁴ Ivi, p. 15.

²⁵ The sentence of first instance was confirmed by the other two levels of the Italian legal system: appeal and cassation.

name of an unlikely *pax mafia* to end the massacre and solidify their presence and power in the area, the two rival *'ndrine* reached an agreement founded in blood. In fact, the March 3, 2012 assassination of Domenico Bonarrigo, a boss of the Mazzagatti-Polimeni-Bonarrigo *cosca*, was viewed as an “innocent mistake”²⁶ by Giuseppe Ferraro, the fugitive boss of the enemy Ferraro-Raccosta *cosca*. In the world of the *'Ndrangheta*, the concepts of understanding and forgiveness simply do not exist. You always pay for your mistakes with blood. Ferraro betrays his associates who committed the crime and delivers them into the hands of his rivals, “giving them ‘clearance’ to commit some of the most gruesome murders ever recorded in legal history”,²⁷ by providing useful information to the Mazzagatti-Polimeni-Bonarrigo *cosca* so they could find, kidnap and kill the culprits. Di Bella writes:

It became quite clear to someone with such mafia ties and criminal experience as Giuseppe Ferraro that their blood was the tribute necessary to end hostilities within the area and above all, in a law unique to the *'Ndrangheta*, to be observed when dealing with such a grave “disagreement” between *cosche*.²⁸

All phases and protagonists of this story are known to the public thanks to the results of the *Erinni antimafia* operation conducted by the DDA of Reggio Calabria and by law enforcement.²⁹ Among the executioners of Domenico Bonarrigo’s assassins is the victim’s stepson, Simone Pepe (born in 1989). A man of extreme cruelty, he bragged of having committed four murders along with his accomplices:³⁰ those of the handler and hit men who had killed his stepfather,³¹ as heard in intercepted calls.³² In these conversations he admits: “*I already did it, I*

²⁶ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Sentence, September 19, 2014, signed by Roberto Di Bella, pp. 1-52, p. 11.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ See www.strettoweb.com/2013/11/ndrangheta-nomi-foto-e-tutti-i-dettagli-delloperazione-erinni/105236, November 26, 2013. Wikipedia includes an entry about this affair: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faida_di_Oppido_Mamertina.

³⁰ These are the names of the accomplices to the brutal murders of Francesco Raccosta and Carmine Putrino: Pasquale Rustico, Rocco Mazzagatti and Domenico Scarfone (Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Sentence, September 19, 2014, cit., p. 13).

³¹ Here is the list of the victims: handler Vincenzo Ferrara killed on March 13, 2012 (only ten days after the murder of Domenico Bonarrigo); hit men Francesco Raccosta and Carmine Putrino, kidnapped and killed on the same day, March 13, 2012, and Vincenzo Raccosta, killed on May 10, 2012, (ivi, pp. 11-15).

³² Information is taken from the January 20, 2013 conversation between Simone Pepe and Matteo Scarponi, and the February 18, 2013 conversation between Pepe and his uncle, Fabio Pepe, “where the godson of Domenico Bonarrigo gives a substantial confession to the killings” (Di Bella, ivi, p. 15).

already massacred them, the four I was interested in”,³³ and he tells how Francesco Raccosta and Carmine Putrino were taken, beaten, killed and, in the case of Raccosta, fed to the pigs while still alive. I shall cite an excerpt so that the reader can better understand what we mean, today in the twenty-first century, when we speak of the ‘Ndrangheta as a primitive, tribal and brutal subculture. From the interception of Conversation n. 3450, here are the words of the then twenty-four-year-old, suspected of multiple homicides:

I find these guys [Francis Raccosta and Carmine Putrino] who are on top of a green Panda 4x4 [vehicle] which they borrowed from someone else so we wouldn't see them leaving the village. We caught them right away [...] Anyway, I go: “I want to look him in the eyes while I kill him”, I told him, “...umm... Simone cut it out, don't do this stuff, knock it off, Simone, this is something you'll carry inside of you your whole life, just remember Simone, knock it off, you're not playing, this is not a game, Simone, this is your life [...]. Shoot them and be done with it.” I took the shovel we use to scoop shit... pig shit [...], he thinks he was bound and was on his knees because I was going to shoot him in the head, execution style, a shot to the head [...]. We had these pigs ... I told him, “Now I'll make you die while you are still alive and let's see how you suffer, you piece of shit.” We grab him and ...I attached him like a ham [...], on the pulley ...yeah, I attached him by the feet and I started hitting him with the shovel everywhere and ... he ... he was already half dead ... he had turned black in the face ... it was a beautiful sensation, no, even better [...] We threw him inside the food trough [...] aaahh....it was total satisfaction to hear him scream... my God how he screamed [...] there was nothing left, all I saw were bones ... I saw one crunching on his tibia [...] I said, “this pig sure can eat!”³⁴

The narrator is a stepson of the ‘Ndrangheta, a worthy heir to his stepfather who molded and raised him, whose case makes us reflect on the meaning of ‘a mafia based on blood ties.’ After the assassination of *Mimmo* Bonarrigo, whom Simone Pepe called “father”,³⁵ Pepe and his friends, planning revenge, reiterated to their friend Matteo Scarponi:

my father was dead, Matte', they wanted to take his place, they thought they could do it but they couldn't because, fortunately, Mimmo had a son, me, and I've got brains...³⁶

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Sentence, September 19, 2014, cit., p. 14.

³⁵ Domenico Bonarrigo had married Simone Pepe's mother (he had a different biological father); *ivi*, p. 7.

³⁶ Conversation N. 3449 of January 20, 2013; *ibidem*.

Simone Pepe, now serving sixteen years in prison,³⁷ was at the height of his glory at the time of his arrest on November 26, 2013. He was the glory of the son of an 'Ndrangheta boss, steeped in death, anger, and violence. He was a bully who elicited respect through terror, a charismatic leader whose status enthralled the younger generations. And this is the link that leads us to the young O. Growing up in the same place and environment, O. found his role model and inspiration in Pepe. So it should come as no surprise that O. was sentenced to six years imprisonment for being a willing member of the Mazzagatti-Polimeni-Bonarrigo *'ndrina* in which Pepe was the rising star. The judicial acts confirm

that O. was a weapons supplier for Simone Pepe (and, therefore, for the *cosca*) and was fully aware the criminal purpose for the arms he supplied, i.e. using them for committing murders or attacks on enemies of the above-mentioned group.³⁸

Based on documents and evidence (including several interceptions) used by the Reggio Court, young O.'s role as a supplier of deadly weapons, his inclusion as a member of the mafia to which Pepe belonged and with whom the boy shared frequent coded conversations ('moto' for 'weapon'; 'bampata' for 'used'), and his fear of being the victim of an ambush, all seem incontrovertible. Here is an example of their exchanges (from a telephone conversation at 11:30 pm on June 20, 2012, after the four murders had already occurred):

O.: They got you! [They shot you?]
Pepe: Yeah, that's right! [...]
O.: Are they from here? [Oppido Mamertina]
Pepe: No, here [Rome] [...]
O.: And what do you want?
Pepe: What do I want to do?... I'll take them out [I'll kill them]... get yourselves ready, it'll happen in two days, max...³⁹

They seem to be discussing tactics from a video game. But these words are real and the two speakers are not playing games. Another example from later in the conversation, in poor Italian:

³⁷ The September 30, 2016 sentence of first instance (assise) issued by the judges of the Criminal Court of Palmi (President Silvia Capone), within the framework of the process called Erinni, condemned Simone Pepe to sixteen years in prison, reducing the request for life imprisonment by the Public Prosecutor. The September 10, 2018 sentence of second instance (appeal) cancelled the omicide accusation and the mafia association crime, and condemned Simone Pepe to six years in prison. For the sentence and conviction to be confirmed they must pass the third and last level of Italian law (cassation).

³⁸ Ivi, p. 36.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 39. It should be noted that Pepe had to move away from Calabria and was hiding in Rome, where he suffered an attempt on his life, referenced in this conversation.

O.: You are...um...you don't have anything there?
 Pepe: Nothing! That 'moto' you sent... [Referring to a weapon]
 O.: Yeah?
 Pepe: We used it two days after we got it, because we needed it!
 O.: Oh!
 Pepe: You didn't know that it was 'bampata' [used]...that we used it!
 O.: Yes, but the one that I sent to you? That I sent you personally...
 Pepe: I know [...] I needed that one to do something!
 O.: There aren't any more?
 Pepe: No [...]
 O.: Let me see what I can find, right now I now have zero...
 Pepe: Yeah, see, see, I don't know what to tell you, see what you can do, because the situation is absolutely critical.⁴⁰

Within the Acts of the Court emerges this disturbing figure of O.: an acting member in Pepe's *'ndrina*; involved in the illegal trafficking and stocking of weapons reserved mostly for Pepe; a supplier of valuable information to Pepe on what was happening in Oppido Mamertina; a close liaison to other youths, likely members of his *cosca*. Further aggravating the situation is the evidence that proved his intention of going to Rome to bring weapons to Pepe or, at the very least, of helping him to avenge the armed ambush. All of this is supported by the evidence that the same Pepe showed extreme trust and confidence in the young O., often turning to him in difficult moments. In his conclusions Di Bella declares:

There is no doubt that the unlawful conduct of O., under the spell of the charismatic criminal personality of Simone Pepe, reveals a particular proclivity toward crime, an alarming nonchalance in performing criminal acts, and an apparent contempt for the Law.⁴¹

The story of Pepe and that of O. illustrate the disastrous consequences of the 'Ndrangheta's founding principles: the blood ties and bad upbringing offered by corrupt individuals and social environments.

3. Discomfort and harassment

The case of the child M. (born in 2008) allows us to see firsthand the misfortune of being born into an 'Ndrangheta family. The child's mother escaped from the 'Ndrangheta and, in a brave and difficult move, became a State's witness, thus

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 47.

showing why the ‘Ndrangheta is so difficult to combat: accusing your own family is perceived as an unnatural act. She named her father, brother, and cousin as the murderers of the young man with whom she had had an extramarital affair. The subsequent criminal litigation against her father and brother, in which her husband (who had once tried to strangle her, causing her serious injuries) and family members made known their personal resentment against her, pushed the woman to seek the help of the State. The Court, therefore, at the request of the District Attorney in an April 2013 decree, ruled to revoke the parental rights of the Father; gave full custody of the child to his mother; adopted a temporary witness protection plan for the mother and child in a protected location; supervised monthly meetings between the father and child with psychological assistance from Social Services in order to avoid mistreatment or undue pressures on the child (for example, inducing the mother to recant and to leave the path of legality she has chosen). However, the mother decided voluntarily turn down the witness protection program, giving as a reason for this choice her need for “more freedom” to choose the Northern Italian city in which to live, and her wish not to deprive the child of his father, due to restrictions imposed by the witness protection program:

“The child suffers because he misses his father, and his condition exacerbates my own emotional instability.”⁴²

The woman confirmed, however, her concerns for her child’s fate:

“I heard what my husband said during the June 11, 2013 hearing before the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, and I reiterate my detachment from the culture in which he and all my relatives are immersed [...]. I would like my son to grow up differently from them, with respect for shared social values, not in a culture where honor, respect and violence are mandatory values.”⁴³

She asked for different protective measures for herself, and while insisting implicitly on sole custody, she also wanted authorization for contacts and meetings, even in Calabria, between the father and child

in order to alleviate the child’s suffering due to his a strong emotional bond with the parent, but on the condition that their relationship was civil and the child was not exploited to persuade her to withdraw her accusations.⁴⁴

⁴² Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree n. 421/14 R.V.G., March 3, 2015, signed by President Roberto Di Bella, pp. 1-16, p. 4.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 5.

However, it was still an uphill road, and the gravity of the situation began to weigh heavily. With a decree on July 2, 2013, the judge in Reggio criticized the conduct of the father, who – although not yet convicted of a crime – had not expressed any detachment from the criminal lifestyle of his wife’s family or remorse for the youth whom his father-in-law had murdered with a tire iron. Indeed, statements and omissions by M.’s father during the trial demonstrate his complete and disturbing adherence to ‘Ndrangheta culture. With regard to the murder committed by his father-in-law, he commented:

In order to judge one must go back and look at the prior facts and then one should consider that the victim was with a woman who still was married... It’s not right to kill a man, but sometimes things happen for the smallest reason. Today you can die even over a parking spot. My own father was killed in 1989 and we never understood why.⁴⁵

A mafia son himself, child of a murdered father, passive and fatalistic with regard to the difference between life and death: what sort of values can such a father transmit to his child? This is the key question that pushed Di Bella in 2012 to undertake his judicial path with the protocol and the project *Free to choose*. The father’s statements on his wife’s role as a State’s witness are similarly tainted by the mafia stain. After an apparent repentance – “*I recognize that it was wrong to put my hands around her neck*”⁴⁶ – he alleged with conviction that neither he nor other members of the family held any resentment against her, and everyone (including himself) understood and justified the accusations that she had formulated as attributable to the woman’s mental confusion:

“They excused her for what she said because they knew at that time she was sick, in the sense that she was depressed, even if she wasn’t under a doctor’s care.”⁴⁷

In short, according to young M.’s father, the case of the murder of his wife’s friend by his father-in-law, known as “*the great worker*”, was just tabloid hype;⁴⁸ as for his wife, everyone in the family (him foremost) love, understand and forgive her, because – according to the well-worn cliché – she is crazy and nobody should believe her. For these reasons the Court, with the July 2, 2013 decree confirmed:

sole custody of the child is entrusted to the mother, and the father’s parental rights are revoked; however, following the wishes of the

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 7.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 6.

abovementioned mother and in order to support the emotional needs of the child, he is authorized to meet and keep the child with him in accordance with certain rules.⁴⁹

But the situation becomes yet more complicated as events unfold. In a hearing on October 2, 2014, M.'s mother expressed concern for the child and for herself. On June 12, 2014, during the trial for her lover's murder in the Criminal Court of [omissis], her testimony contributed to the weighty sentences for her father, brother and cousin. From that moment, the family's attitude and the relationship with her husband changed radically. In accordance with the rules and the code of the 'Ndrangheta, she was doubly a traitor: first for having cheated on her husband, and then for having spoken to the cops and accusing her relatives of murder. Consequently, M.'s father has ignored and violated the decisions of the Court: he ceased payments to the mother of a monthly agreed-upon sum (2,500 euro), depriving her of resources for the child's maintenance; he became extremely menacing and violent; he hit her in the face, giving her a black eye in front of the child, who was deeply traumatized. In addition, the woman complained that the working relationship they had achieved in raising their child, which until then had been acceptable, had changed. In particular, she stressed that after a stay in Calabria which occurred after her testimony, the child's attitude toward her suddenly changed, to the point that he did not want to go back to live with her: "I was forced to leave him in Calabria because the child cried for a week."⁵⁰ Also showing an aggression never seen before, the child "used expressions and formulated judgments that were not his own and not typical for his age."⁵¹

The father, in breach of the law, enrolled him in the elementary school in his county of Calabria, while the child should have gone to school in his mother's new city. The woman added that

when talking on the phone with the child, it was typical to hear her husband and mother-in-law shouting insults against her in the presence of the child.⁵²

On this point, I must emphasize the extreme – and necessary – firmness on the part of Di Bella, whose initiative stemmed from a similar case, one which unfortunately ended in bloodshed for the victim, a young mother named Cetta – to whom I will return in the next chapter.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 7.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 8.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

The surge in the father's violent conduct against his wife in the presence of the child, and his repeated devaluation of the maternal role, have led to his indictment for the offense of domestic abuse according to Art. 572 of the Criminal Code, which shall be handled by the relevant authorities. As a consequence of this behavior, the mother was granted sole custody of the child, and the father's custodial rights moved from a "partial limitation" to a "complete revocation." It should also be noted that, despite the latter representing a "harmful educational model" (Di Bella),⁵³ the same judge, respecting the emotional needs of the child, has left open the possibility of meetings between the parent and child, with the assistance, supervision, and support of Social Services, in order to ensure the child's safety and not to undermine his delicate emotional stability.

4. Domestic violence, threats, and fear

This time the victims⁵⁴ are an Eastern European woman, married to a violent Calabrian *mafioso*, and their daughter E., born in 2006. In the mother's words:

In addition to these episodes there were various quarrels between me and him for silly reasons, and he always beat me, mostly punching me in the head, pulling my hair and sometimes kicking me. I remember one night, when he was angry with his mother, he was kicking me while our baby was in the same bed. In November 2012 my daughter and I were in bed, he came back home screaming. As soon as he came into the room I told him to lower his voice so he wouldn't wake the baby and for this he punched me. I moved out of the way, but he hit the baby on the head and she woke up crying; at this point I was sick of the situation, so in January I left the house and I moved to Gioia Tauro. I couldn't stay in [omissis] because my husband's family is well known and nobody would have helped me.⁵⁵

The mother complained of having been continuously insulted and abused by her spouse for years. The abuse often took place in the presence of the child E., when he wasn't beating the little girl herself. She said that the violence continued even after their separation – "*Bitch! Whore! You left home!*"⁵⁶ – with death threats even in front of E., who had developed negative feelings and hatred toward her father:

⁵³ Ivi, p. 11.

⁵⁴ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree n. 321/2103 R.V.G., May 19, 2015, signed by President Di Bella, pp. 1-16. On p.3 one reads that the paternal surname belongs to the powerful [...] family "known as members of local organized crime."

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 2.

⁵⁶ The father's words, *ibidem*.

“Now she is scared, and for the last three months she does not want to see him.”⁵⁷ In fact the little girl at first had agreed to see him in order to protect her mother from beatings: “In the previous months she went because she realized that if I didn’t allow her to go with her father he would have beaten me.”⁵⁸ The mother added that on one occasion the girl, crying, reported that she had been insulted by her father because she didn’t know how to tie her shoes (“stupid piece of shit”).⁵⁹ On another occasion, which highlights the father’s lack of empathy with his daughter, he provoked a strong emotional reaction from E. when she refused to give him a kiss after receiving a gift from him. The mother stated, moreover, that she had never gone to the police for fear of retaliation by her husband or members of his family.

The case of little E. is indicative of the great care with which the Court of Reggio works, according to which, initially, the above statements were

on the one hand sufficient for considering the father’s parental abilities inadequate, to the point of suggesting the adoption of a measure to limit his parental rights; on the other hand, they did not justify the complete revocation of rights requested by the Public Prosecutor.⁶⁰

This is why, with all necessary safeguards guaranteed by the relevant institutions, the father would have been able to see the child. Later, however, thanks to the notes from January 31, 2014 and December 19, 2014 reported by the Protective Services of the Ministry of the Interior (into which program the mother and child have been accepted with relocation to a safe area), it emerged that continued meetings between the child and her father were no longer possible⁶¹ due to E.’s refusal, which she explained to the psychologist:

“she has very negative memories caused by the meetings she has had with her father in her birthplace” and “she does not miss her relatives back in her birthplace because there were so many quarrels, and both her dad and her grandparents did not love her.”⁶²

After Latella received this note from the Juvenile Prosecutor of Reggio Calabria, he renewed his request for the revocation of the father’s parental rights, according

⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p. 5.

⁶¹ Provided by order of the Civil Court of Vibo Valentia in the separation order between the spouses; see *ivi*, p. 6.

⁶² *Ibidem.*

to Art. 330 of the Civil Code, with no visitations between the father and child. The Court, having seen the results of this new investigation, finally accepted Latella's request. I shall cite here some excerpts so that the reader may better visualize the 'Ndrangheta underworld from which these children must be saved. In the first place, the Mobile Command Unit of Catanzaro had found a typewritten standard disclaimer form, with the handwritten date of January 23, 2013, in the family home of E.'s father, evidence that the family tried to make E.'s mother sign a document that would clear them of having subjugated her throughout her time in their home and country.⁶³ The woman repeated in detail that she always suffered ill treatment and harassment by her husband's family, who over the years had forbidden her to leave the house or have contact with other people, forcing her to work inhuman hours as a slave in their bakery and their house:

“I continued to suffer as a slave for [omissis] until I no longer had the strength to work for twenty hours per day; I had to clean the house where my parents-in-law lived, care for my child and also manage the bread production.”⁶⁴

The woman then pointed out that after her first attempt to rebel (in particular, after family members saw her say hello to a police officer from a neighboring town), her husband beat her “*with kicks to the belly and punches to the head*”, and both he and the mother-in-law threatened her, the latter saying “*she would cut off her head*” and make her daughter motherless, as had happened with “*Tita*”,⁶⁵ the wife

⁶³ See *ivi*, p. 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ In 1989, at fifteen years old, Santa *Tita* Buccafusca (class 1974) had met her future husband, Pantaleone Mancuso (class 1961), alias *Scarpuni*, considered one of the most powerful and bloodthirsty 'Ndrangheta bosses, now incarcerated. *Tita* died on April 18, 2011, at the hospital of Polistena, two days after swallowing hydrochloric acid while at home. The investigation into incitement to suicide was then closed. But after almost five years the case was reopened. Her death, according to a new hypothesis proposed by the District Anti-Mafia Directive of Catanzaro, was connected to the woman's escape from her marital home one month prior, to ask for shelter and state protection. On the morning of March 14, 2011, *Tita*, with her child in her arms, came to the police station of Nicotera Marina asking for help. Two days before, in San Calogero, the drug boss Vincenzo Barbieri, king of cocaine imported from South American cartels, was assassinated. *Tita* told the *Carabinieri*: “They are killing each other like dogs...”. She added: “Go to my house and seize the computer before it disappears.” She was relocated to the regional headquarters of the *Carabinieri* of Catanzaro. Now under protection by the *Carabinieri*, she wanted to call her husband to tell him that she had decided to make life changes to give her son a better future, and to collaborate with law enforcement, to inform them about herself, her husband, and the 'Ndrangheta. The next day, on awakening she was ready to sign the depositions, with the *Carabinieri* and magistrates all around her, and assisted by psychiatric staff because in the past she had suffered ‘acute paranoid reactions.’ They gave her the two-page document: she stopped halfway through her signature on the first page. At that point an official from the ROS [Special Ops Squad], asked her in a “clear and firm” manner – we read in a report to the DDA – to make her choice, because otherwise she would lose her armed security, since there would be no basis for protective services. *Tita* then asked to speak with her sister. They shared a quiet and affectionate phone call, at the end of which she told the *Carabinieri*: “I'm not signing, I'm definitely not signing.” Her sister and

of a powerful mafia boss from the same family as E.'s father, who in her despair found the strength to go to the *Carabinieri*, thus causing panic among her husband's *cosca*, and who died shortly after under suspicious circumstances, after falling into a state of deep depression:

“My husband and my mother-in-law always said that I would meet the same end. I was really terrified. I have told you the story of Tita to show that my every attempt to reason with my husband and in-laws resulted in beatings and threats that, after Tita's death, were a clear reference to her demise.”⁶⁶

Although the beatings were a daily routine with frequent injuries that should have required medical care, the woman added that she never sought medical help because she knew she couldn't trust the doctors in the local hospital, all of whom followed the orders of her husband's *cosca*. Her initial decision to leave the town and relocate to Gioia Tauro was met with threats and violence. Exasperated, she confided with her own mother who lived abroad in her homeland, and with Tita who, before her death, had become her confidante about separating herself from her husband's mafia family. As a result, the woman decided to collaborate with law enforcement, fearing for her own life and that of her child.

Her statements were then reflected in a conversation, dated June 15, 2008, intercepted during investigations carried out in the same area for an attack against a couple, the woman of which was a close relative of E.'s father. During the conversation two friends speak while driving in a car, and referring to E.'s mother, say they can't believe they had never seen her around, given that she is a foreigner, except one time crying in church. They added that “she was clearly worn out by the mistreatment she suffers (They are killing her with beatings, you know! Just like the wife of [*omissis*])”.⁶⁷

To this evidence we may add the expert testimony of a psychologist from the Family Counseling Center of Gioia Tauro (see the March 3, 2015 memo). The expert stated that the lady was very exhausted and scared, and that the little girl, giving the same version of events and consistent in her testimony, had also indicated in their regular talks the maltreatment her mom suffered, showing an

brother-in-law arrived in Catanzaro on the evening of March 15, 2011 to pick her up and bring her back to her house and her husband, Pantaleone Mancuso. A month later, on April 16, Mancuso went to the *Carabinieri* of Nicotera Marina explaining that his wife had drunk hydrochloric acid. Her death made headlines in all the national media. For more details on the information summarised here see: <http://www.ilvibonese.it/cronaca/2671-morte-tita-buccafusca-dda-inchiesta>.

⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 8.

⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 9.

“unusually protective attitude toward her mother (not appropriate to her role as daughter)”.⁶⁸

After hearing about this ever-increasing list of horrors, the constant degradation of the mother, and the serious repercussions on the delicate emotional state of an eleven-year-old girl, on May 19, 2015 the Reggio Court, in order to save the child and her mother, declared the father “unfit to maintain custodial rights with respect to his daughter E.” and prohibited “any contact between the minor E. and her father.”⁶⁹

5. Aggression and terror

The life of B. and her three children (born in 2001, 2005, and 2010, respectively) also fall within the context of this *continuum* of violence. The mother was caught in a double stranglehold: by the threats, abuse, and aggressions against her on the part of her ex-husband F. during their difficult separation, and by the feared vendetta against her current partner, an *ex-mafioso* considered a rat. Looking for a means of escape, on January 23, 2015 B. asked the ROS to place her under security detail, in view of her partner G. B.’s recent collaboration with law enforcement, which had progressed to criminal proceedings.⁷⁰ She also made this choice to protect herself and her three children born from the marriage with her ex-husband, from whom she feared retaliation and from whom she often received scorn, beatings and death threats in her children’s presence. From 2012 to 2014 she had filed a series of complaints and restraining orders against him, sometimes requiring the intervention of the *Carabinieri* for his violent and abusive conduct. From the April 11, 2012 complaint:

“Because of threats I received, I was afraid that he would hurt me ... my ex-husband walked right up to me and told me all threateningly that I should not dare to write him in a text message that he can only see his children through a lawyer... at the same time he was slapping me in the face, shaking me, yanking my hair and scarf, abusing me with slurs like “whore”, threatening to kill me and my family, and while he was about to hurl a chair at me my cousin [*omissis*] intervened. Present during this incident were my son C., who saw what happened and started to cry, and my daughter N., who fled the house in fear and locked herself in the car... I suffered from pain in my neck, face, and in my right eye, so I decided to go to the emergency

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 14.

⁷⁰ “Criminal proceeding n. 1151/10 RGNR of the DDA of Reggio Calabria”, Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree n. 21/15 R.V.G., March 31, 2015, signed by Di Bella, pp. 1-21, p. 2.

room in Gioia Tauro, where I was given an estimated recovery time of 5 days as stated in the medical report.”⁷¹

From the July 18, 2012 complaint:

“In one of the discussions that we had he told me several times that I am a dead woman walking.”⁷²

From the February 8, 2013 complaint:

“The children’s fear is understandable since they have witnessed a fight that F. and I had where he beat me. This occurred in October 2012, immediately after the separation. He had come home, it was evening and he wanted to take the children out ... He grabbed me by the neck with both hands and dragged me from the entrance into the room and threw me onto the sofa, with his hands still tight around my neck and with such force that I was suffocating, so much so that I couldn’t move or scream...Fortunately my mother was there and intervened, and in an attempt to free me tried to pull him off from behind. It was difficult because he is strong compared to my mom ... the children were present and I fear they could remain traumatized. In fact, they were very frightened, even the little one, who was two years old at the time, cried with fear along with his sisters... I am very afraid, because he has violent outbursts and has raised his hand against me many times. I live in terror that he could seriously hurt me...”⁷³

And again:

“Regarding the children I should specify that he has never beaten them but has no problem hurting me in front of them, it being understood that he still exerts disturbing psychological influences over them, such as when he harasses them with questions about my private life. He behaves in a domineering manner with them, always asking who comes into my home, if I go out, etc. And children handle this situation badly because they are immersed in adult affairs that they don’t understand. One time he also said to the children that one day their life would change, because if another man were ever to come into his home, first he would kill me and then the other man. The children are very frightened and upset because of this.”⁷⁴

The words of B. shed light on the intolerable situation of a woman – a mother – who has been mistreated, beaten and denigrated before her children – all of whom are in a serious state of emotional exhaustion – by her *mafioso* and extremely

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 4.

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 6.

negative ex-husband. Add to this the terror due to threats and vindictive retaliation against her current partner by the ‘Ndrangheta culture where the situation occurred. Last but not least, there are the 2014 statements which the oldest child, then thirteen, made “with absolute tranquility and clarity”,⁷⁵ to the Juvenile District Attorney of Reggio Calabria:

“It is true that my father has raised his voice and beaten my mother out of jealousy, even in the presence of me and my brothers, saying everything... swearing and saying ‘I’ll kill you.’”⁷⁶

Giving further details:

“Me and my brothers all hate to hear and see what I mentioned above. Also, my little brother, who is only four years old, when he sees my father screaming and beating our mom he bursts into tears. Even after the separation my father has continued to fight with and insult my mother in front of me and my brothers.”⁷⁷

And in conclusion:

“I prefer to remain living with my mother because my father is not able to take care of my brothers and can’t be bothered with us...when I’m at my father’s house, I often have to take care of my little brother by myself because my father goes out or is sleeping”.⁷⁸

The fact that in 2014 a thirteen-year-old Calabrian girl, born into a mafia family, must be the mother to her four-year-old brother, in a foreshadowing of the destiny of resignation and violence awaiting her in a world of mafia, machismo and malevolence, is a reality that a State governed by the rule of law cannot accept and must not allow to happen.

From these few excerpts emerge elements sufficient to understand what led the Reggio Court to declare, “with a decree of urgency and *inaudita altera parte*”,⁷⁹ F.’s parental rights revoked with respect to his three children, and sole custody given to the mother, to be relocated with them to a site secured by the State and outside of Calabria. It should be noted that despite the firmness of the Decree, meetings with the father and other family members are permitted, so long as they are organized and supervised, with all due precautions, by Special Protective

⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 9.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 9-10.

⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 10.

⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 11.

Services and by ROS, with a mandate to suspend these meetings in the event of injury.⁸⁰

6. Traumas

Among the innocent children followed by the Reggio magistrates, we see yet another example of family ties on which the ‘Ndrangheta feeds: in this case twins born in 2007. The parents of the two children are both incarcerated, sentenced on October 29, 2013, for crimes of mafia association and extortion according to 416 bis: the Calabrian father was sentenced to sixteen years and eight months, the foreign-born mother remained under house arrest. The twins, after revocation of both parents’ custodial rights, were co-entrusted to their paternal grandmother and to Social Services in the Municipality of Reggio Calabria. However, the foster grandmother was then arrested for the same crimes. For this reason it was necessary to take a subsequent step and co-entrust the children to a trustworthy pair of relatives without a criminal record and to the local Social Services, until the restrictive measures against the mother are withdrawn (decree issued on September 23, 2014). It should be noted that the Court has made arrangements to guarantee the children a certain amount of continuity, in that the co-fostering married couple can

have access and stay in the mother’s home in order to assist her in caring for the children for the time necessary until her house arrest is no longer in effect.⁸¹

But since then the situation has worsened. The G.I.P. (Preliminary Investigating Judge) of the Court of Reggio Calabria had to intervene once again and, in a sentence on December 19, 2014, condemned the father

to eight years and two months in prison for four counts of aggravated extortion and an additional two years and ten months in prison for one count of receiving a stolen identity card for expatriation. With this same judgment, the mother – now free from house arrest – was condemned to a total of six years in prison for mafia association and aggravated extortion. More recently (on January 7, 2016), the G.I.P., by means of the Court of Reggio Calabria, condemned the father to eighteen years imprisonment, considered a continuation between the alleged criminal offense and the analogous one in Art. 416 bis c.p.,

⁸⁰ Ivi, p. 19-20.

⁸¹ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree n. 121/13 R.V.G., September 23, 2014, signed by Di Bella, pp. 1-8, p. 5.

already decided by the Appellate Court of Reggio Calabria with the sentence dated January 14, 2013.⁸²

All of these criminal proceedings highlight the destructive family environment and criminal backdrop of the twins' childhood. These excerpts display the sequence of events in a neutral and bureaucratic style. What they do not depict is the rough and difficult reality of their lives. These are children of a very young age, born not by choice into a forsaken place and family, and in the course of a few years they witness their father disappear, their mother under house arrest, they become accustomed to their grandmother and then watch her disappear, they get used to the new married couple, and still interact with Social Services, while around them everything continues to worsen. The deterioration of their family situation has already had a serious impact on the delicate psychological state of the two children, helpless spectators to the arrests and incarcerations of almost all their family members (parents, grandparents, uncles), and it casts a worrisome shadow over their future:

It is evident that the personal life choices of the father who, as has been definitively established, belongs to a dangerous faction of the 'Ndrangheta, have already caused material injury to the normal and sound personal development of his two minor children who, precisely because of the father's conduct, were forced to suffer irremediable traumas in the early years of their lives, i.e. in the phase in which a caring parental presence constitutes the essential foundation for healthy personal development. This injury to the children's emotional integrity has become self-perpetuating for a prolonged period, taking into account the length of the parents' sentences which prevent them from guiding their children during the delicate adolescent phase.⁸³

Moreover, with regard to their paternal role model, there is no doubt that

in adherence with the arguments adopted by the criminal court which suspend parental rights for the duration of the sentence, "conduct related to criminal association appears incompatible with the educational function that governs the powers and duties of parental responsibility."⁸⁴

Resulting as a logical corollary is the official revocation of his parental rights by the Juvenile Court.

⁸² Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree, n. 81/16 R.V.G., April 26, 2016, signed by Di Bella, pp. 1-11, p. 2.

⁸³ *Ivi*, p. 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*.

And the mother? She deserves different considerations. She is foreign, without her own income, subordinate to her husband, restricted by the need to support her children. The criminal court diminished her prison sentence and, in line with the earlier decision – taking into account that she had demonstrated adequate care of her children – did not suspend her parental rights. The Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria then reconfirmed the woman's path toward positive change.⁸⁵ Indeed, the mother asked the State for help seeking logistical, residential and job support:

“In Italy and in Reggio Calabria there is no member of the family I can trust. The Juvenile Court is the last resort for me and my children. I am willing to comply with all the requirements that the court requires and I ask to be put in contact immediately with Don Ciotti's Libera association.”⁸⁶

In a painful deposition she told Di Bella of her concern for her children's future and the urgent need to remove them from the negative influences of their family environment:

“Mr. President, I have come to you because I fear for the fate of my children who have a notorious surname, and I am afraid that in the future they might follow in the footsteps of their father and his family by ending up in prison. I would like my children to live a peaceful life, away from the harm and dangers that come along with their family environment... If my children remain in Calabria, their future is certainly compromised, as it was for my husband and his relatives. In fact, my husband was convicted for mafia membership, my brother-in-law as well, and my father-in-law and mother-in-law for mafia-related crimes. I am very concerned about the fate of my children if I go to jail; in any case, I would like them to be sent away from Calabria and their paternal relatives while maintaining constant contact with me. If I were to go to jail, I would ask you not to entrust my children to their paternal relatives and, in particular, to my in-laws, who would not be able to assure them a peaceful and lawful upbringing, as demonstrated by their own fate and that of their children, all of whom ended up in prison or killed [one of her brothers-in-law], and are mentioned in the sentence as being part of the mafia.”⁸⁷

Thanks to the intervention by the Juvenile Court of Reggio, the woman – awaiting final judgment by the Court of Cassation on her diminished prison sentence – now lives in a classified location, far from Calabria, having been admitted to the witness protection program along with her two children, who are co-entrusted to her and to the Social Services authorities in her new location.

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 4.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 4-5.

The conditions and situations seen here are a concrete reality that cause serious emotional trauma in their victims, which result from family, environmental, and social upheavals and require, beyond the first necessary judicial intervention, diligent and constant supervision, assistance and psychological/neuropsychiatric support provided by an experienced network of professionals. This constitutes the primary motivation and the end goal of the project *Free to choose*, which from July 2017 has the endorsement of the central government.⁸⁸

The following pages, which provide an overview of a choir silenced forever, speak for themselves. They enable the reader to delve into the mafia subculture which permeates the world in which Di Bella and his colleagues operate.

⁸⁸ As for the Italian youth justice system, see Patrizia Meringolo, *Juvenile Justice System in Italy: Researches and interventions / Sistema de Justicia Juvenil en Italia: investigaciones e intervenciones*, 2012, available on line (<https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/647/64725418005.pdf>).

CHAPTER THREE: REQUIEM MAFIOSA



1. Stabat Mater

Here I shall list the children killed by the 'Ndrangheta, an “honored company” devoted to the Holy Mother Church, from the 1950s to today.¹

DOMENICA ZUCCO, 3 years: the first female victim in the period after the Second World War, killed on September 11, 1951 in San Martino di Taurianova (Reggio Calabria). The killer opened fire against the father, Domenico, who was wounded. The child, however, was struck in the head.

CONCETTA LEMMA, 16 years: killed by fire from a sawn-off shotgun on January 11, 1964. Victim of a feud vendetta.

COSIMO GIOFFRÈ, 12 years: killed by rifle and pistol fire on the night of January 18, 1965 in Sant'Eufemia d'Aspromonte, along with his mother Concetta Iaria (37 years) in front of his three other siblings. Victims of a feud: the husband and father Giuseppe Giofrè was in prison, convicted for a double homicide.

SALVATORE FEUDALE, 10 years: killed by fire from a sawn-off shotgun on September 20, 1973, in the Piazza Mercato in Crotona, along with his nineteen-year-old brother Domenico. Again, victims of a vendetta.

GIUSEPPE BRUNO, 18 months: fatally wounded on September 11, 1974, in Seminara, while going upstairs in the arms of his father Alfonso, the actual target of the hit, who instead survived.

MICHELE AND DOMENICO FACCHINERI, 9 and 10 years: killed by fire from a sawn-off shotgun on April 13, 1975 in the fields outside Cittanova, while in the company of their uncle Giuseppe, involved in a feud between warring families in their town.

GIUSEPPINA PANGALLO, 3 years: killed on December 12, 1975 in San Giovanni di Sambatello while in the car with her mother.

¹ For information and details on the victims of 'Ndrangheta feuds (women and children included) see: Gratteri and Nicaso, *Fratelli di sangue. Storie, boss e affari della 'ndrangheta, la mafia più potente del mondo*, cit., 2008; Danilo Chirico and Alessio Magro, *Dimenticati. Vittime della 'ndrangheta La storia e le storie delle donne e degli uomini assassinati dall'organizzazione criminale più segreta e potente del mondo*, Roma, Alberto Castelvechi editore, 2012; Arcangelo Badolati, *Mamma 'ndrangheta. La storia delle cosche cosentine dalla fantomatica Garduña alle stragi moderne*, preface by Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso, Cosenza, Pellegrini editore, 2014.

ROCCO CORICA, 7 years: killed in Taurianova on September 29, 1976 in an ambush targeting his father. His face was disfigured by the bullets.

GIAMPIERO CONTE, 9 years: massacred on September 1, 1977 inside a home in Rosarno, by gun shots as well as stab wounds, along with his father Mario and mother Maria Rosa, to avenge her infidelity. The incident appears to be a triple “honor” killing by the ‘Ndrangheta.

PASQUALINO PERRI, 12 years: killed by machine-gun fire inside a restaurant in Rende on October 27, 1978. He was in the company of his father, Gildo, and the boss of the Sibari region, Giuseppe Cirillo, who was the intended target of the hit.

GRAZIELLA AND MARIA MAESANO, cousins, both 9 years: killed in Le Castella (Crotona) on September 21, 1982. A hit man killed the boss Gaetano Maesano along with his young daughter Graziella and niece Maria.

GIOVANNI CANTURI, 13 years: killed on November 9, 1982 in Caraffa del Bianco while tending animals with his uncle, the killer’s designated victim.

BORTOLO AND ANTONIO PESCE, 10 and 11 years: killed on October 24, 1982, in the village of Pizzinni di Filandari (Vibo Valentia), by the explosion of a bomb planted outside the home of a convicted criminal, where the children happened to be playing.

DOMENICO CANNATÀ, 11 years, and SERAFINO TRIFARÒ, 14 years: massacred in San Ferdinando on the evening of November 4, 1983 in front of a bar on Rosarno Avenue, while they were with Domenico’s father, Vincenzo Cannatà, who escaped death.

GIOVANNI CANTURI, 12 years: killed on November 9, 1982 in Caraffa del Bianco with his uncle Rosario Zerilli, recently returned from Australia, during a feud lasting ten years.

FRANCESCO PUGLIESE, known as CECCHINELLO, 13 years: on January 2, 1983 in Vibo Valentia he disappeared without a trace.

GIANLUCA CANONICO, 10 years: fatally wounded during a gunfight on July 3, 1985 in Reggio Calabria, while playing ball in the courtyard of his house.

MARCELLA TASSONE, 9 years: on the evening of February 22, 1989, in Laureana di Borrello, she was slaughtered along with her brother Alfonso while in the car with him. She was shot seven times in the face. The double homicide was the product of a vendetta.

ANDREA BONFORTE, 15 years: killed at dawn on January 2, 1990 in Catona, on the northern outskirts of Reggio Calabria. The target was his brother.

SAVERIO PURITA, 11 years: On February 23, 1990 he disappeared from Vibo Valentia. He was later found murdered, his body charred.

MICHELE ARCANGELO TRIPODI, 12 years: kidnapped and killed in San Ferdinando on March 18, 1990. Victim of a family vendetta, the child was on his bike and was murdered to spite his father. His remains were found in 1997 thanks to the revelations of an informant.

ARTURO CAPUTO, 16 years: killed on the evening of July 4, 1990 in a pizzeria in the town of Strongoli, near Crotona. He was in the line of fire during a hit targeting a local criminal.

DOMENICO CATALANO, 16 years: killed in an ambush on September 1, 1990 in the neighborhood of Archi CEP, in the northern part of Reggio Calabria.

ELISABETTA GAGLIARDI, 9 years: killed on September 7, 1990 in Palermiti, with two gun shots to the head. The hit men were looking for her father, and in his absence turned on the daughter and wife, Maria Marcella, also killed.

SAVERIO PURITA, 13 years: on February 23, 1990 he was found in Curinga with his head buried in the sand and his body burnt.

LETTERIO NETTUNO, 15 years: on January 5, 1991, because he participated in a failed ambush orchestrated by the rival Serraino *cosca*, he was kidnapped in Reggio Calabria, tortured, killed with an awl and buried in lime by the Latella-Ficara *cosca*.

NICHOLAS GREEN, 7 years: he was fatally wounded on September 29, 1994 in an attempted robbery by the mafia, while in the car with his family on the Salerno-Reggio Calabria highway.²

² Nicholas Green (San Francisco, September 9, 1987 – Messina, October 1, 1994) was an Anglo-American boy who was shot and killed in an attempted car robbery while vacationing with his family in Southern Italy. The robbers mistook the family's car for that of a jeweller. When Nicholas died, his parents chose to donate his organs. The incident is credited with generating a significant increase in the rate of organ donation in Italy. Following the shooting, Italian police arrested two men on November 2, 1994: Francesco Mesiano and Michele Iannello. They were tried in Catanzaro by a court consisting of three judges, and on January 17, 1997 they were found not guilty. Reginald Green had been unable to identify them, as the shooters had both been wearing masks, and it was dark. However, a year later, with no new evidence, an appellate court with a jury convicted the pair. This decision was upheld by Italy's supreme court in 1999. In 1998, a TV movie, *Nicholas' Gift*, starring Jamie Lee Curtis and Alan Bates, was based on the event. In recent news (August 10, 2017) Reginald Green expressed his desire to know the status of the person who received his son's organs, but in Italy the law prohibits this practice (see Giuseppe

MARIANGELA ANSALONE, 8 years: killed on May 8, 1998 in Oppido Mamertina, along with her grandfather Giuseppe Bicchieri, by three hit men hired to kill two rivals. The grandfather and granddaughter were traveling in a car mistaken for that of the intended targets.

LUCA CRISTELLO, 14 years: he disappeared without a trace on May 17, 2002 in Francica, near Vibo.

PAOLINO RODÀ, 13 years: killed on November 2, 2004 in the countryside around Ferruzzano, along with his father.

DOMENICO DODÒ GABRIELE, 11 years: killed on June 25, 2009 in Crotone. He was playing ball in a soccer field when the hit men opened fire with the – successful – intention of killing *mafioso* Gabriele Marrazzo. Dodò, mortally wounded by mistake, died after three months of agony.

NICOLA COCÒ CAMPOLONGO, 3 years: on January 16, 2014, killed in the car along with his grandfather Giuseppe Iannicelli, a drug dealer, and Iannicelli's twenty-six-year-old companion. Their charred bodies were found on January 19.

Dying for the mafia at eighteen months, or three years, or eight years of age: intentionally or accidentally. These children are powerless *objects* – not *subjects* – of the system into which they are born. They are victims (as in this list) or perpetrators (like those tried and convicted from the previous pages), but even the latter are victims of the system. By now it should be clear to the reader that in the world of the 'Ndrangheta, children are considered to be the inheritors of the family's criminal tradition, and thus end up in jail or murdered. The action of Di Bella's Court, with its small but significant percentage of cases heard, stands as one of the few viable alternatives to this state of affairs.

2. Sancta mater

Equally shocking is the chronology of women killed by all mafia groups (Cosa Nostra, Camorra, 'Ndrangheta, Sacra Corona Unita) from 1896 to 2012. There are 157 in all, killed for grudges, for revenge, by mistake. Their stories now have been collected in a dossier by the association "daSud", titled *Dishonored. The mafias kill women: a list so we do not forget*.³ Scrolling through, we discover that

Melloni, "Il papà di Nicholas Green e le storie delle famiglie che scelgono di incontrarsi. In Italia è vietato, ma a volte è utile. I limiti della legge", *Corriere della Sera*, August 10, 2017, p. 19).

³ Available online: <https://bluesocket.mills.edu/login.pl>.

almost no year passes without at least one woman killed by the mafia. To list all the names and stories in a single paragraph here would be impossible.

The first was EMANUELA SANSONE, 17 years, daughter of a barmaid in Palermo. She was brutally killed, two days after Christmas on December 27, 1896, because they thought her mother had reported some *mafiosi* for manufacturing counterfeit banknotes. Here follow other cases of women and mothers killed by the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta:

MARIA AND NATALIA STILLITANO, 22 and 21 years: killed on December 22, 1962, in Drosi in the Gioia Tauro plains, by Domenico Maisano during a feud between families. The murder of the two young women was a vendetta against their uncle.

CONCETTA IARIA, 36 years: massacred on January 27, 1965 at her home in Sant’Eufemia di Aspromonte, together with her twelve-year-old son, as a vendetta because her husband had killed two people seven months before.

MARIA IMMACOLATA MACRÌ, 45 years: murdered for revenge on June 1, 1969 in Mammola by another woman, Maria Teresa Ferraro, mother of a boy killed by Macrì’s nephew.

RITA CACICIA, 39 years, ROSA FAZZARI, 68 years, NICOLINA MAZZOCCHIO, 70 years, LETIZIA PALUMBO, 48 years, and ADRIANA VASSALLA, 49 years: all victims of the ‘Ndrangheta. It was believed that the five women died in the derailment of the *Freccia del Sud* train – which had departed from Palermo heading North – in Calabria, near Gioia Tauro, on July 22, 1970, which took the lives of six persons and wounded seventy – two others. But twenty years later, in 1993, informant Giacomo Ubaldo Lario would reveal that this was a terrorist attack organized by right-wing extremists who – as part of an anxiety-provoking strategy put in place to pave the way for the attempted coup of fascist Valerio Borghese⁴ – made use of the ‘Ndrangheta’s manpower in order to pull off the attack in Calabria. Passing all levels of judgment, on July 5, 2007 the Court of Cassation has officially closed the case.⁵

LEA GAROFALO, 35 years: brutally murdered on November 24, 2009 in Milan by her *ndrangheta* ex-partner Carlo Cosco, father of their only daughter Denise.

⁴ Junio Valerio Scipione Ghezzi Marcantonio Maria of the house of Borghese, known as Junio Valerio Borghese (1906–1974), was an Italian military officer and politician with a notable adherence to fascism. In the early morning hours of December 8, 1970, he planned a (failed) coup known to history as the ‘*Golpe Borghese*.’

⁵ Michele Albanese, “Tolto il segreto sulla strage di Gioia Tauro” [The secret of the Gioia Tauro massacre revealed], *Il Quotidiano della Calabria*, April 23, 2014.

SANTA *TITA* BUCCAFUSCA, 37 years: on April 18, 2011 she committed suicide by ingesting hydrochloric acid and died in the Polistena hospital.⁶

MARIA CONCETTA *CETTA* CACCIOLA, 31 years: «committed suicide» (read: murdered) on August 22, 2011 in Rosarno in the bathroom of her home by ingesting hydrochloric acid.

MARIA CHINDAMO, 44 years: kidnapped and killed on May 6, 2016, for family revenge, her corpse fed to hogs.

⁶ On Santa *Tita* Buccafusca, see footnote 197.

CHAPTER FOUR: *WOMEN*



These last two cases on a list bound, unfortunately, to grow much longer, are very close in date and far too similar to pass unnoticed. And they should be considered using the symbolic codes of the ‘Ndrangheta. Anyone who talks to the enemy (the State), thus betraying the family honor, is forever marked as a rat and must be physically eliminated. And because one uses one’s mouth to talk, physical elimination of the rat does not suffice. It is necessary – in order to make an example and strengthen the group’s status and consensus – to punish him or her exceedingly, symbolically, with the destruction of said mouth. From this stems the choice of forced drinking of hydrochloric acid, whose atrocious and deadly effects on the mouth and throat are no mystery to medical literature. The recent gruesome deaths of these two mothers provides yet another glimpse into the world of women from whom are traditionally expected resignation, fatalism, subordination to masculine power, and the continued transmission of ‘Ndrangheta values to their offspring. It goes without saying that among these millions of women there exist similarities and differences of all types. The issue is vast and complex, and we do not wish to oversimplify it. Nevertheless, we can trace three general personality types.

Many ‘Ndrangheta women live in a state of perpetual subalternity: passive, silent, and acquiescent. We have already mentioned the archaic traditional lifestyle, which exalts the matriarchal role within the biological family and replaces ritual affiliation with criminal membership. Within the family group, the women rule the roost. It is the mothers who transmit the values and ideology of the ‘Ndrangheta to their children. Conceived, born, and raised inside the ‘Ndrangheta system, having in their turn assumed its customs, values, codes and laws, logic dictates that they are called upon to perpetuate, preserve and defend the world to which they belong. It is the only one they know, the only one they have experienced (often to their detriment, though with complete, little, or no awareness of the fact). They are often forced into arranged marriages to strengthen the power of the family *cosca*. They must raise the male children as *‘ndranghetisti*, educating them and exhorting them to carry out vendettas; and the daughters must be exactly like them, as subservient and obedient as possible. Any dialectical relationship with the Other is precluded; free will is forbidden.

Many active and stubborn women have instead introjected the male criminal model to the point of assuming primary roles and becoming feared and savage

bosses themselves. Gratteri states that in the course of investigations and trials he has witnessed many women playing an active role in the 'Ndrangheta: women disguised as men who commit murder; women entrusted with the logistics of moving fugitive fathers, husbands and sons from one place to another (e.g., hidden in the trunk of the car as happened during the feud of San Luca); women trafficking drugs, carrying deadly weapons, exporting illegal money;¹ women perched in their fortress of *omertà*, exhorting their children to take revenge for the wrongs they've suffered.

Still others, albeit more rare, are beginning to come forward and are growing in their numbers, desperate but brave, frightened but hopeful for a radical change that will free them from the mafia yoke and return them, along with their children, to a life worth living.

1. Mafia “padrine”

There exists a vast body of literature on female mafia bosses who have reached the highest ranks of mafia power and have never dissociated themselves or turned informant. They are ruthless *padrine* (“female godfathers”) who rule with increasing autonomy, as the investigations and convictions demonstrate. From Sicily to Calabria, the *cosche* are seeing more and more women actively replacing their fathers, husbands and brothers who have ended up in prison or killed by the mafia. From grandmothers like Mary Serraino; to middle-aged women like Marisa Di Giovine Merico, Angela Ferraro, and Giulia Fazzari; to young women such as Ilenia Bellocco; and even aggressive *'ndranghetiste* new-comers from Eastern Europe.

1.1 Maria Serraino

A powerful woman of the 'Ndrangheta, Maria Serraino (class 1931), called the *Heroin Mamma*, is a Calabrian who moved to northern Italy in 1963, and an undisputed boss, during the 80s and 90s in Milan, of one of the largest international trafficking rings of weapons and drugs. Her twelve children, both males and females, followed her commands with complete subservience as her

¹ On this topic one can listen to Gratteri's comments in Beatrice Borromeo's documentary, *Lady 'Ndrangheta* (2015), a portrait of mafia women which highlights the saga of the women of the Serraino and De Giovine families: http://tg24.sky.it/cronaca/2015/03/06/lady_ndrangheta_speciale_a_cura_di_beatrice_borromeo_video_donne_di_mafia.html.

soldiers. In her own family one of her daughters (Margherita *Rita* Di Giovine), involved in the family business and addicted to amphetamines, was arrested by the police and became a famous informant and State's witness against the 'Ndrangheta in 1993 (her collaboration led to the arrest of more than one hundred members of the clan, including her mother), while her son (Emilio Di Giovine), a long-time streetwise and successful boss, was arrested by the police and became an informant and State's witness in 2003. In the history of women's emancipation, Maria Serraino boasts a sad record: she is one of the first women in Italy condemned to life imprisonment.²

1.2 Marisa Merico

To this same family belongs granddaughter Marisa Merico (class 1970), a former *cosca* boss – the daughter of Emilio Di Giovine who retained the surname of her ex-husband Bruno Merico, a *mafioso* extremely faithful to her father – who in 1992 inherited the role of boss from her grandmother and from her incarcerated father. It was the father who asked her to take his place while he was in prison yet again. That father – and I would like to draw the reader's attention to this point – taught her to handle a Benetti 12-gauge rifle as a child in Aspromonte, while he whispered in her ear that she was his “*little princess*.”

She was introduced to weapons at age nine; at eighteen she was trafficking drugs throughout Europe; at twenty-two she was the head of the most dangerous clan in Lombardy. When she in turn became the mother of two children, she first asked, without avail, for help from her *mafioso* and drug addict husband Bruno Merico (father of her eldest), and then from the gangland boss Frank Birley (father of her second-born), in trying to escape their life of crime and give their children a normal future. She was arrested in England and sentenced to five years in the maximum security prison of Durham for money laundering. After serving her sentence and after Frank's violent death, she managed to start a new life, without ever becoming an informant: she, who had always argued that the 'Ndrangheta is “*in your blood*” and who had become an *'ndranghetista* at eighteen years old. Her choice at that time meant going against her own father who, imprisoned in Parma from the time of Marisa's adolescence, had to have known that she would have preferred a degree rather than mafia membership, to marry a professional rather than a *mafioso*. Daughter of a British mother, she became famous in Great Britain

² In September 1997 she was condemned definitively to life imprisonment for criminal mafia conspiracy, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and arranging the murder of rival *cosca* members.

thanks to her autobiography about her criminal life,³ although the book contains no new revelations because it tells only of what can be found in the court documents. Marisa was neither an informant nor a collaborator, unlike her aunt Rita and her father Emilio, both of whom the ‘Ndrangheta sought to eliminate because, again, it does not accept the idea of “repentance”, considered a betrayal of all that is *unique and sacred* to the mafia and to the family. Nevertheless, Marisa was disowned and scorned as well because, as her powerful grandmother Maria Serraino stated: “*You are the daughter of a rat.*” And what is more, Marisa had, in her own way, “sung” and broken the sacred code of silence by daring to write about her life as an *‘ndranghetista*, of which even her grandmother disapproved:

“You wrote a book, you gave interviews. Enough of this. You cannot return to Italy. If you ever set foot here, they will kill you. You cannot see your father or you’ll be dead.”⁴

We recall Gratteri’s words: “When a person becomes a collaborator, a State’s witness, that person is dead to them. They are considered dead. The family members dress in black, dress for mourning.”⁵

In short, the saga of the Serraino family allows us to see that, within a single biological and criminal family of the ‘Ndrangheta, there exists turbulence,

³ Marisa Di Giovine Merico told her story and that of her family, with the help of Douglas Thompson, in a book entitled *The Explosive True Story of a Mafia Princess. They're lawless. They are criminal. They are family* (HarperCollins, 2010). The book, translated by Dade Fasic, was published in Italy in 2011 by Sperling & Kupfer, with the title *L'Intoccabile. Da Milano a Londra. La storia di una vera principessa della 'ndrangheta*. Here below I shall quote an abstract of the book from the website of Amazon Italy: “What is she doing, on this day in 1988, this blond half-English half-Calabrian in a Citroën full of kalashnikovs traveling from Milan to the South of Italy? Is this the same girl who years before accompanied her mom and dad on innocent trips to Switzerland, in the cradle stuffed with contrabband cigarettes? Is this the same woman who much later would rule a clan with a drug trafficking revenue in the billions? It reads like a novel about a (criminal) upbringing, complex as a thriller, but nothing here is fiction: it is the truth, the whole truth of Marisa Merico, daughter of an English girl who in the 1970s married a young ‘Ndrangheta boss, Emilio Di Giovine. Set in an angry and brutal Milan straight from a movie set, it is the portrait of an archaic, ruthless world, heady with money and power, which revolves around the ‘family’ in which she grew up: an illiterate grandmother who cooks, prays and orders hits; a father who built castles out of cocaine, exchanges women, cars, and identities, escapes from jail cells like Houdini; a gangster husband who married her in a ceremony worthy of The Godfather. This is a disturbing journey into the darkest depths of the ‘Ndrangheta – from beating someone who “dared” to speak to a woman, to the corruption of judges and police, to a protagonist who wound up immersed in that world for the love of two men. And from that world she learned the rules of survival in maximum security prison. She protected her two children. And today she fight for her freedom, without betraying her past. The ‘family’ always comes first.”

⁴ Lucy Fisher, ‘Marisa Merico: Miss ‘Ndrangheta’, Italian translation in *Internazionale*, 994, April 5, 2013, pp. 68-70, p. 70.

⁵ On this subject see Gratteri’s comments in the documentary by Beatrice Borromeo, *Lady ‘Ndrangheta*, cit., 2015.

conflicts, struggles and strong oppositions. And along with the powerful and ruthless she-devil boss, a mirror image of her traditional male counterpart, there also emerge individuals who, at a certain point, realize they need to change course: either by dissociating as informants and collaborators, like Rita Lo Giudice and her brother Emilio, or by paying a high price that leads them in a different direction, like Marisa Merico: “*When the ship goes down, everyone must pay his dues, prison included, with no shortcuts.*”⁶

Today Marisa Merico is forty-seven years old and, without any formal repudiation, has renounced her membership in the ‘Ndrangheta. She lives in England working as a housecleaner and taking advantage of state income support. Her father continues his dissociation from the ‘Ndrangheta and lives in Italy under a new identity in a secret location, protected by the State. Marisa’s autobiography provides direct confirmation, from within the heart of Calabria, what ‘Ndrangheta experts such as magistrate Nicola Gratteri and don Giacomo Panizza⁷ have often said about the active and contradictory role of women in the *Santa*.⁸

1.3 Angela Ferraro

Angela Ferraro is fifty years of age and is a Calabrian with more determination than other women under investigation. In intercepted calls she comes across as fierce, and she displays her *ndranghetista* mentality with pride. She is the mother of State’s witness Giuseppina *Giusy* Pesce, along with Francesco and Marina, both indicted for mafia-related crimes. Her husband is boss Salvatore Pesce, known as *Ù babbu* (“the idiot”), and she is sister to Giuseppe Ferraro, also a mafia member. In April 2013, in the trial named *All Inside*, the court of Palmi sentenced Angela Ferraro to thirteen and a half years in prison, while her daughter Marina was given twelve years and ten months. Along with public prosecutors Cerreti and Pantano and the former Head District Attorney of Reggio, Cafiero de Raho, for the first time in Calabria all the heads of law enforcement were present at the sentencing hearing of this crucially important trial, which concerned the ruthless clans controlling the Piana di Gioia Tauro area. This sent a strong message to the defendants that the State is united in its fight against the ‘Ndrangheta. Angela Ferraro held a special position in this mafia hierarchy: she was not simply a

⁶ www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2668881/Born-Mob-The-extraordinary-story-Blackpool-schoolgirl-turned-Mafia-crime-boss-whos-finally-gone-straight.html#ixzz4McUA3Ibz.

⁷ The Brescian priest don Giacomo Panizza, “loaned” – as he loves to point out – for more than thirty years to Calabria, in Lamezia Terme (Calabria) in 1976 founded and directs his own agency, *Progetto Sud* (Project South) as part of his fight against mafia education.

⁸ I refer to their statements in the documentary by Beatrice Borromeo, *Lady ‘Ndrangheta*, cit., 2015.

temporary alternate. She held the same rank as the men: she was involved at the same level as her brother who was a major boss, she handled the Milan syndicate, she managed drug trafficking between Milan and Calabria. Mrs. Ferraro controlled extortions without asking permission of the men of her *'ndrina* and she participated in clan discussions as if she had the rank of a general. No member of her family *cosca* was offended by her status; on the contrary, they offered her respect. She even arranged murders, in particular against her cousin Rosa Ferraro, a former 'Ndrangheta member, now a State's witness.⁹ She also spearheaded the attempted corruption of a judge at the Court of Cassation, by means of a lawyer, to sway a trial in favor of the defendants from her *cosca*. Her strength derives in part from the fact that Angela Ferraro is the wife of Pesce, but even more so because she is sister to Giuseppe Ferraro. Her daughter Marina Pesce, 30 years old, is a messenger of the godfathers: she ran messages and directives back and forth to various affiliates. She knew all the family secrets and supported their expansion. She had already been held for three years on the day of sentencing, and she remained behind bars in her security cell, sitting next to her mother and crying her eyes out during the reading of the sentences which lasted almost an hour. When the judge pronounced his condemnation, she stood up with tears in her eyes and began to bang her head against the cell wall, stifling her pain over her conviction through clenched teeth. All in all, there were thirteen women charged in the *All Inside* trial: seven were convicted, among which the very young Maria Stanganelli, wife of Ciccio *Testuni* Pesce, and the sister of the latter, Maria Grazia Pesce, both given seven years; for two others the offense was declared time-barred. But a heavier verdict could be in store for Teresa Gallico, 65 years of age: the Public Prosecutor of Reggio's Anti-Mafia Directive, Giovanni Musarò, requested a punishment of twenty-seven years in prison. Teresa took the place of her incarcerated brothers as head of the powerful Gallico *cosca* and often states that she should have been "*born male*." Indeed, it was she herself who collected *pizzo* and participated in meetings with the representatives of other families in order to decide on crimes and strategies. And Teresa Gallico was quite proud of her position, so much so that in prison, in a conversation with her brother, she boasted about her criminal exploits, saying: "*I'm just like you*."¹⁰

⁹ On Rosa Ferraro, now 63 years of age, see http://www.corriere.it/cronache/11_novembre_26/la-seconda-vita-della-pentita-graziata-dal-fratello-killer-giuseppe-guastella.

¹⁰ Lirio Abbate, *ibidem*.

1.4 Giulia Fazzari

Recently arrested and awaiting trial after decades of bold immunity, the powerful 'Ndrangheta bookkeeper Giulia Fazzari (class 1959) is the daughter and wife of a mafia boss. Her intriguing story dates back to the 1970s, when the Fazzari family was displaced from the Sampierdarena quarter of Genoa to the western edge of Savona, between Albenga and Borghetto Santo Spirito, while another part of the same family settled in Belgium. The orchestrator of this move? Antonio Rampino, ruler of the 'Ndrangheta in Liguria. As a result of this strategy, head of the family Francesco Fazzari, Giulia's father, began the 'Ndrangheta's colonization of Liguria and beyond. He infiltrated public contracting (with the subcontracting of ANAS for the construction of the *Carabinieri* barracks in Borghetto)¹¹ and began to create a web of networks with law enforcement, magistrates, public administrators, businessmen and powerful Freemasons. It should not be forgotten that the mafia and corruption always go hand in hand.

Mafia entrepreneur Fazzari flourished for decades in the construction sector through his system of contacts as well as retaliations, threats, and attacks on those parties who would not bow to his demands.¹² Boss Fazzari resorted to property damage, arson, explosives, kidnappings, attacks against investigators, international financial fraud; he also made use of allied *cosche* such as the powerful De Stefano *cosca* of Reggio Calabria. He ruled with an iron fist, completely unopposed, in an ever-widening zone that ranged from Liguria to Piedmont, Belgium, and the former Yugoslavia. Seated beside Francesco Fazzari in control of criminal activity, networking, and affairs, was Giulia, his favorite daughter. In typical 'Ndrangheta fashion, she was given in marriage to one of the more ruthless members of the Gullace-Raso-Albanese *cosca* of Cittanova in Calabria, a certain Carmelo *Ninnetto* Gullace, who in the following decades would become the head representative of the *cosca*. The marriage between Giulia and Ninnetto – postponed several times due to the bridegroom being arrested – marked the union of two criminal associations. I would note here that during the feud with the rival Facchineri *cosca* in Calabria, Gullace and Raso murdered even children without remorse.

In the early 1980s, Giulia Fazzari came under the radar of the then investigating magistrate of Palermo, Giovanni Falcone, who wished to interrogate her while she continued to escape in order to avoid the meeting. In the 90s she was affected by sequestration of billions in registered assets which in reality belonged to the

¹¹ ANAS (acronym for the National Autonomous Roads Corporation).

¹² On this point see the volume by Pino Arlacchi, *La mafia imprenditrice*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2007.

cosca. She managed to escape those investigations unscathed, along with her husband Carmelo Gullace, and she became an increasingly crucial cog in the organization. This couple's obstinate indemnity should come as no surprise: there is evidence that they produced false alibis, tampered with witnesses, and did whatever necessary to influence and "fix" trials, as a direct witness of the family's inner workings has recently recounted.

The Fazzari-Gullace couple, through money-laundering, extortion, and fraud, has on the one hand infiltrated broad sectors of the local economy and, on the other hand, has brokered powerful new alliances, such as with the Mamone, seated in Genoa, with whom from that moment forward they would build a monopoly in land reclamation and earth-works in the Ligurian capital, or as in the case with the Fotia, who controlled public contracting and subcontracting in the Savona area.

The companies she headed, just like those headed by her sister Rita and Rita's husband, Roberto Orlando, managed over the years to solidify relationships that ensured public concessions, from minor contracts to the management of the Balestrino landfill quarry, thus offering the association an essential tool for entering into larger contracts, such as the high-speed railway. The fact that they buried thousands of toxic waste drums in the old illegal quarry of Borghetto Santo Spirito presented no problem for them, because they didn't care if they continued to operate in a completely illegal manner, as attorney Francantonio Granero recently noted before the Commission of Inquiry on Waste Disposal.

From the 1980s to the present, either directly or through third parties, they have steered urban planning decisions for many municipalities in western Savona. In the succession of administrative elections, this family, as the epicenter of the 'Ndrangheta in western Liguria, has influenced the outcome of the vote and the composition of the municipal councils, thus guaranteeing the necessary influence to pursue their own projects.

Votes, favors, blackmail... this was their *modus operandi* from the moment of their relocation and is the *modus operandi* that Mrs. Giulia Fazzari has kept intact as their means of power. Today this association boasts of international branches and networks, from Spain to South America and Australia. They provide yet another demonstration, if ever one were needed, of the successful globalization of the 'Ndrangheta.

In the sting of July 19, 2016, the result of the operation *Alchemy* by the District Anti-Mafia Directive of Reggio Calabria,¹³ Giulia Fazzari and Ninetto Gullace

¹³ The investigation also examined the 'Ndrangheta's irregular contracts for the Terzo Valico dei Giovi and in particular for earth-works. (The Terzo Valico is a railway line which aims to create a

were finally arrested along with forty other individuals in Liguria and Calabria. The accusations against the suspects are as such: criminal mafia association, outside participation in a mafia association, corruption, and false registration of goods and companies. Investigators are also executing a preemptive seizure of movable goods, property, and the bank deposits of numerous companies related to the investigation with a total value of approximately 40 million euros.

Today Fazzari is doing hard time (41 bis) in a prison reserved for *mafiosi*. But she has not ceased to exercise her power. The anti-mafia activist Christian Abbondanza writes of her:

She is a woman who embodies the merciless essence of the ‘Ndrangheta far more than many men. An example of this is the persistence with which she dedicates herself, for example, to eliminating her brother Rolando, who not only dissociated from the family when as a teenager he refused to carry out murders and kidnappings, but who has had the courage (although unheeded for decades) to denounce his family’s crimes. Thanks to actions and omissions by the authorities who were accommodating to the interests of Giulia Fazzari’s family, not even simple safety measures at a mine entrance – obligatory by law – have been carried out, with the consequence that, on October 31, 2012, a landslide at that entrance took the life of an eighteen-year-old boy, Gabriele, Rolando’s son.

This last point, moreover, is emblematic of the absence of anti-mafia squads in Liguria, considering that even today, after the arrests during operation *Alchemy* by the District Anti-Mafia Directive of Reggio Calabria [...], Mrs. Fazzari and husband Carmelo Gullace’s ability to intimidate still holds western Savona in their grip, with their associates still operating freely and undisturbed and Rolando Fazzari suffering increasingly stifling isolation because he dared to say “no” to the family and to Lady ‘Ndrangheta, not only refusing to bend the knee but also denouncing them to the authorities.¹⁴

high-speed connection between Genova and the rest of Europe. Construction began in autumn of 2013, and the line it is supposed to be completed in 2027).

¹⁴ “Tutti ai piedi della signora Giulia” (All bow to Mrs. Giulia) by Christian Abbondanza, President of the non-profit organization *Casa della Legalità* in Genoa; see: <http://mafie.blogautore.repubblica.it/2017/07/ai-piedi-della-signora-giulia> (July 7, 2016). On these events, and on the activities of certain Calabrian families in western Liguria, Christian Abbondanza – who provided me with information on the Fazzari family - has been running a media campaign for some time, after meticulously collecting documents, information and audio/visual materials. Abbondanza, quite unsurprisingly, has recently received death threats.

1.5 Velenia

The last among the native Italians is the case of twenty-three year old Ilenia Ballocco, known as *Velenia* for her toughness,¹⁵ considered the sovereign of a section of the Gioia Tauro plain around the town of Rosarno. It was here that her father Umberto Ballocco, called *Assu i mazzi* (“Ace of Clubs”), founded the family *cosca*, bolstered by his daughter’s marriage with Giuseppe Pesce, appointed ruler of Rosarno after the arrest of his brother Ciccio Pesce. This was a choice which Ilenia made willingly, aware that her wedding would bring a dowry of undisputed criminal authority and a rich share of construction contracts for the most controversial highway project in Italy, connecting Salerno to Reggio Calabria.¹⁶ The young female godfather

on the day of her wedding offered as wedding favors to her thousand guests a Lalique crystal cobra with eyes made of precious gems. Ilenia, who declares zero income to the tax authorities, lives the life of a princess, with shopping sprees for designer clothing, the latest generation smartphones and tablets, not to mention massages and beauty treatments. All the men of the clan have great respect for “Velenia” and do her bidding without question.¹⁷

1.6 Eastern European ‘Ndranghetiste

To complete the already complex universe of women in Calabria’s mafia underground, I shall mention briefly a new worrisome phenomenon, explored for the first time – with his usual competence and rigor – by Arcangelo Badolati, a journalist and scholar who for years has dedicated his career to the ‘Ndrangheta and treats this particular aspect in his most recent work entitled *Le ‘ndranghetiste dell’Est. Profili internazionali della mafia calabrese* (Luigi Pellegrini editore, Cosenza, 2017). Badolati examines the evolution of the ‘Ndrangheta and the persistence to this day of the “feud law” among ‘Ndrangheta families. The scholar also investigates an aspect, heretofore unexplored, that characterizes the recent history of the most powerful mafia in the world: the role within the Calabrian *cosche* of women from former Iron Curtain nations. As the wives and companions of bosses and *picciotti* (lower-ranked *mafiosi*) these women, who grew up in a culture in which the ‘Ndrangheta has not yet put down roots, have transformed

¹⁵ It should be noted that the Italian term ‘veleno’ means ‘poison.’

¹⁶ This is the A3 highway connecting Salerno and Reggio Calabria, the construction of which began in 1987 and has dragged on from time immemorial with a shocking increase in costs and a whole series of mafia contracts.

¹⁷ Lirio Abbate, Investigation: “Mafia, è l’ora delle padrine” (Mafia: the era of the female godfathers), in *L’Espresso* June 10, 2013, pp. 15-21.

themselves into feared and respected *bosses* or faithful *lieutenants* handling extortion, organizing cocaine trafficking, and managing companies created to launder the proceeds of illegal activities. This is the case for Edyta Kopaczynska, mistress to Cosenza godfather Michele Bruni, the only Polish national to be sentenced in Italy with a final judgment of mafia membership; Lucia Bariova, the Slovak mistress of Cassano crime lord Vincenzo Forastefano, “technical director” of the transportation company Forastefano; Ukrainian Oksana Verman, mistress of the Mileto drug trafficker Salvatore Pititto, who harbored Colombian drug kings in his own home.¹⁸ The life of the “Crime Mistresses” is reconstructed through confessions they made to the authorities.

The lives of Eastern European women ‘imported’ into Calabria mirror those of the local ‘Ndrangheta women, and here we find both the mother of twins (see the section “*Traumas*” in this volume) sentenced along with her husband for mafia association and held under house arrest,¹⁹ as well as the mother of young E. who, since her arrival in Calabria, has always been treated as a slave, just like many native-born women.²⁰

These women, who leave behind desperate living conditions in their home countries, once in Calabria are thrown into an ‘Ndrangheta environment and mimic, adapt to, embrace or endure the mafia culture they live and breathe. But sometimes, as we have seen, they also begin to resist.

1.7 Summary

The cases seen so far require, for the purposes of my discourse, a pause for reflection. The criminal and murderous grandmother, ignorant and illiterate, who, according to the family’s account, gave orders to move rivers of drugs and money and to commit murders and crimes, all while preparing her best pasta and meatball dish: when did she ever have the chance to be a child? And the daughter

¹⁸ In addition to the reconstruction of these women’s lives, the volume also details – highlighting the globalizing and chameleon-like character of the ‘Ndrangheta – the foreign hit men hired by the Calabrian *ndrine* to carry out ambushes or eliminate enemies during mafia wars. The book focuses on three hired assassins from Kosovo, Macedonia, and Slovakia, respectively: they are mercenaries, murderers for hire. In the text there is also a study dedicated to the presence of the Calabrian mob in the United States, Canada and Australia and the ‘Ndrangheta’s ties to drug trafficking in those nations, thanks to the complicity of the historical families of the American *Cosa Nostra* such as the Bonanno and Gambino families. Finally, to understand the ‘Ndrangheta’s power on the global stage of drug trafficking, there are passages dedicated to the most famous of the internationally known drug kingpins: Nicola Assisi, Pasquale Marando, Roberto Pannunzi, Domenico Trimboli and Salvatore Mancuso.

¹⁹ See the section “*Traumas*” in this volume.

²⁰ See the section “*Domestic violence, threats, and fear*” in this volume.

turned informant who was selling and doing drugs from a very young age: who raised her, and how? And the granddaughter, while half British and in touch with a different culture, another world, another way of life: who was influencing her from a very young age? These are rhetorical questions. Maria Serraino comes from a fierce and archaic world, the daughter of powerful *'ndranghetisti*. She never went to school: her school was the family *cosca*. Along with her best pasta and meatball recipe, a treasure of Italian culinary folk tradition, she also transfused her own *'Ndrangheta* blood into her daughter Rita (and all her twelve children). Her granddaughter Marisa, the “*princess*”, at nine years of age was given rifles rather than stuffed animals by her “*charming, successful and arrogant*” father. Her Electra complex was a foregone conclusion.

But who birthed, raised, and readied these she-monsters for the mafia and for war? And who birthed, raised, and readied all the young *picciotti*, killed in the feud of San Luca and all the countless gang wars and massacres?

They are all children – slaves, both male and female, to a criminal system and subculture that imposes its own models, its own values, its own concept of honor. A subculture that is deaf to debate and dialog. A totalitarianism that destroys without mercy the Other: any who differ from its own self. This is the law of nature over that of civilization, going back to the beginnings of time, by which adults raise their young. Adults have the task and duty of educating their young. Parents must help their children to grow. The problem is *how*. Mafia mis-education and the means to combat this problem are the point of this book.

The example of Marisa Merico – chosen specifically because she is already very well known in England – and that of her grandmother, both powerful and active women of the *'Ndrangheta*, are metonymically speaking the tip of the iceberg of the highly complex and contradictory issue of women in the *'Ndrangheta*'s criminal world, where inherited passivity may become an active force for female-virago-matriarchs like them, but also a force for desperate women seeking a path forward, a true “*link that does not bind*” (Eugenio Montale), a new possibility to live like those whose example we shall examine shortly.

It is important to remember, then, that the woman's front – once far more compact in its monochromatic dimensions and silent in its acquiescence, its will or lack thereof, and its transmission of values – has for several decades begun to burst forth from the cracks, thanks as well to *'Ndrangheta* women of a less masculine character than those whose stories we have just heard.

From these cracks of historical importance have emerged many female figures. With much struggle and solitude they have opposed the system, revolting against the restrictive family dictates and the criminal codes of mafia behavior, in order to

search for an alternative life for themselves and their children. They have received help along this path by compassionate magistrates and associations and, even if not always in the best way possible, by the protective measures of the Italian law. Often hastily relegated to the local news, the stories concerning these women's attempted escapes – some successful, others no – from an immobile, oppressive and criminal system, drip with blood. Women who are distressed, rash and/or courageous, outraged by the violence of their families and their environment. All of whom are in search of a different life. Often (even today) they are the young brides of husbands who were not of their choosing, but imposed on them by their fathers and brothers in order to form necessary alliances between families and *'ndrine* so that they may perpetuate, broaden or increase their own power.

This practice is no different than in centuries past, when royalty arranged marriages between members of different and geographically disparate dynasties to ensure political power, domination and control over the territories and their inhabitants, as well as the safeguarding of their offspring. But here we are speaking of normal women who would like more independence, a better life, a more acceptable future. Women who love their children, who fall in love with another man while the violent, criminal husband inflicted upon them sits in jail for the next few decades. But everything considered normal today in the civilized world of states governed by the rule of law and democracy, is anything but in the lands of the mafia.

These are the *new* women of the 'Ndrangheta who are giving purpose, from within the black hole in which they live and raise their children, to Di Bella's *Free to choose* project.

In the preceding pages we have already encountered various examples of young women – abused wives and desperate mothers – who, with suffering, pain, and resistance, even against their own will, have realized that the only way to build a more tolerable future for themselves and their children is to turn their backs on the mafia and ask for help from the State. Recall once again that the mother of young V. and his two siblings, whose story we discussed at the beginning of the book, became a State's witness after reading in the warrant following her *mafioso* husband's arrest that her son, still a child in the mother's eyes, was in the father's opinion ready for initiation into the 'Ndrangheta. It was then that she decided to violate the 'Ndrangheta's pact of silence and appear in court. Now she wants another life. And, just like her, so do many other women.

Women such as Giuseppina Multari, for example, the widow of a mafia boss's son, Antonio Cacciola, who, after her husband's suicide, became a State's witness in 2005. She, along with three young daughters, was sequestered in the house for months by her in-laws. Degraded and humiliated after the death of her husband,

she told the magistrates that the only place where she could be alone was in the courtyard of the house, in a small, secluded piece of land where there was no one except the animals:

there was a mare [in the courtyard] and it was as if she were the only living being, the only person, better than a person, the only one who could understand me. I spoke only with Margherita, the mare, because it was better to keep all other words to myself, because if even once I dared to breathe a word [. . .] it was [. . .] a catastrophe.²¹

Giuseppina Multari, imprisoned in her own house, was saved by her father, who reported what was happening to his daughter to the *Carabinieri*. She had attempted suicide during the forced imprisonment by her in-laws. Only once she asked for help from her brother, Angelo Multari, who from that day forward was never seen again. He is feared to have been killed. His body was never found: another case of disappearing without a trace, a method much beloved by the “honored company” whose cowardice is as legendary as its oft-boasted *honor*.

Let us now retrace some essential stations of a similar female version of the *via crucis*, from the experiences and tragic endings of pioneers like Lea Garofalo, Giusy Pesce, and Cetta Cacciola, to the recent and unprecedented phenomenon of *white widows*, which is gaining great momentum.

2. Via crucis

2.1 Lea Garofalo

The first tragic station in this *via crucis* is that of Lea Garofalo, the forerunner of the courageous mothers of the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta. Born in Petilia Policastro (Calabria) in 1974, she became a State’s witness following the feuds between her family and that of her former companion. She was abandoned by the State because her statements did not result in a trial, and murdered in Milan in 2009 at age thirty-five, her corpse destroyed by fire. She was the mother of Denise Cosco, today twenty-six years old (born in 1991), who also became a State’s witness – this time well protected and assisted by the State – so that she could shed light on her mother’s murder at the hands of her father, Carlo Cosco, and her ex-boyfriend, Carmine Venturino. The latter, after the judgment at first instance in March 2012 condemning him and Cosco to life imprisonment, during the 2013 appeal proceedings stated: “*We smashed her bones while she burned*”, providing

²¹ For the story of Giuseppina Multari, see Evelyn Illiano, cit., October 6, 2015.

precise details to assist in the discovery of the victim's charred remains.²² On October 19, 2013 the authorities paid public homage to Lea Garofalo, four years after her death, with an official funeral, her coffin shouldered by Don Ciotti, founder of *Libera*, and by Giuliano Pisapia, then mayor of Milan. The horrific story was immortalized by Marco Tullio Giordana, a director particularly interested in mafia subject matter,²³ in the film *Lea* (2015), based on material evidence from the investigation and on the trial hearings.

Some details from the life of Lea Garofalo will give the reader background information on her brief existence. At the age of nine months her father was killed in the "Pagliarelle feud", and Lea grew up with her grandmother, mother, older sister Marisa and older brother Floriano who, having taken over as head of the household, years later would avenge the murder of his father and then would be killed in turn during a mafia ambush on June 8, 2005. At the age of fourteen Lea met the seventeen-year-old Carlo Cosco and moved with him to Milan, where on December 4, 1991, her daughter Denise was born. At first Lea was unaware that he had chosen her as a companion mostly to acquire greater prestige in the eyes of the Garofalo, but the arrest of Cosco and other members of his family for drug trafficking on May 7, 1996 opened her eyes to the facts, and during a visit with him in jail she communicated her desire to leave him and take her little girl as well. Cosco's immediate and violent reaction required the intervention of the prison guards to quell the fight. The mother and daughter left Milan. Years later, in 2002, someone set fire to the car below her house, and Lea Garofalo got the message: the Coscos were on their trail, she and her daughter were in danger. She turned to the *Carabinieri*, and she and her daughter were placed in witness protection with false identities. The life of a State's witness is difficult, due to profound loneliness and continual fear. Lea's information did not lead to any trials until October 2013, after she was already dead, when her statements led to the arrest of seventeen people in various Italian cities. Due to this lack of productive evidence her state protection was revoked. In 2008, during a public meeting, Lea approached Don Luigi Ciotti, founder and president of *Gruppo Abele* and the anti-mafia association *Libera*. She introduced herself as a State's witness, labeled as 'collaborator,' feeling completely disillusioned by the State and its institutions and determined to regain her dignity, her true name and surname, and a future for her and Denise. Therefore, she made acquaintances with the head of the legal department of *Libera*, lawyer Enza Rando, who would do everything in his power

²² See www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2013/04/11/omicidio-lea-garofalo-pentito-lho-fatto-per-amore-di-denise/559048.

²³ Director of *I cento passi* (The Hundred Steps, 2000), devoted to the life and murder of the young Peppino Impastato (1948-1978), who battled against the mafia in his native land of Sicily in the 1970s.

to help her. Nevertheless, the following months were very difficult. The years had not washed away Cosco's bitterness and anger toward her, and his thirst for revenge was satisfied on November 24, 2009. Lea and her daughter were in Milan for four days, and Cosco himself asked to meet with his ex-girlfriend and daughter Denise. It was a trap. Lea, despite lawyer Rando's attempts to dissuade her, decided to meet him anyway. She was confident that as long as she was with her daughter, nothing would happen. During those days the three spent much time together. Cosco's intention was to coax Lea into trusting him. On the afternoon of November 24, Lea and Denise went for a walk near Milan's Arco della Pace. Their walk was caught on video surveillance camera: the mother wore a black jacket, and the daughter wore the same in white. At approximately 6:15 pm, Carlo Cosco met them to bring his daughter to his brother Giuseppe Cosco's house for dinner and to meet her relatives. He then returned to the Arco della Pace, where he was to meet Lea. The murder occurred around 7:10 pm in an apartment at 2 Piazza Prealpi in Milan, property belonging to the grandmother of one of the Coscos' friends. Lea's body was then transported to a plot of land in San Fruttuoso, in Monza, and there destroyed. The trials for Lea Garofalo's murder came about thanks to her daughter Denise who, on the day following the disappearance, told the Milanese *Carabinieri* about her time in witness protection with her mother. Marshal Persurich took her deposition. Denise claimed with absolute certainty that her mother did not disappear by chance (and much less that she left voluntarily as her father immediately claimed and as the defense also stated during the trial), but that in fact she was dead. Killed by her own father's hand. On October 18, 2010, Cosco and other alleged participants in the crime were placed in handcuffs. The trial of first instance began on July 6, 2011. In legal proceedings, Denise presented herself as the injured party (represented by lawyer Enza Rando), declaring: "*I am proud to speak against my father.*" Six of the accused: Carlo Cosco, brothers Giuseppe and Vito Cosco, Massimo Sabatino (whom Carlo Cosco had hired for an attempted kidnapping of Lea Garofalo in Campobasso on May 5, 2009), Carmine Venturino and Rosario Curcio. The accusation is that they kidnapped, tortured and killed Lea Garofalo the night of November 24, 2009, and destroyed her corpse. The Public Prosecutor's case was based primarily on Denise's statements (made before the *Carabinieri* and then in court, during many hours of depositions) and on information from telephone records obtained thanks to the work of the *Carabinieri*. The sentence was issued on March 30, 2012: life imprisonment for all six of the accused. In summer of 2012, Carmine Venturino decided to collaborate with the law. The appeals process began on April 9, 2013. The Appellate Court of Milan reduced the sentence for some of the accused with the sentence of the second degree issued on May 29, 2013: it confirmed life imprisonment for Carlo and Vito Cosco, for Rosario Curcio and for Massimo Sabatino, while it reduced the penalty to twenty-

five years for Carmine Venturino (due to his collaboration) and acquitted Giuseppe Cosco, who is currently serving a ten-year sentence for drug trafficking. The major Italian press outlets were shamefully silent until Lea Garofalo's story finally caught national attention. Following all the trial hearings instead was journalist Marika Demaria of the excellent monthly publication *Narcomafie*, and the students who maintain the website *Stampo Antimafioso*.²⁴ On December 18, 2014, the Court of Cassation confirmed the sentences issued by the Appellate Court of Milan against the five accused. Life imprisonment, then, to Carlo and Vito Cosco, Rosario Curcio, and Massimo Sabatino; twenty-five years to Carmine Venturino due to the reduced punishment for his cooperation. On October 19, 2013 during the public funeral broadcast live by *Rainews 24* and covered by all the major national news outlets, daughter Denise publicly thanked her courageous mother who was killed by the 'Ndrangheta: "because if all this had to happen... it was for my sake... Goodbye Mamma." Lea's remains, those of a young mother, an 'Ndrangheta turncoat and a State's witness, today rest in Milan's Monumental Cemetery.²⁵

3. Annus Horribilis

The year 2011 was an *annus horribilis* for Calabrian women of the 'Ndrangheta. The first inauspicious station occurred on April 18 when Santa Buccafusca, known as *Tita*, died in the hospital from chemical burns following the ingestion of hydrochloric acid. Tita was the wife of Pantaleone *Scarpuni* Mancuso (class 1961), who was chief of the armed wing of the '*ndrina* of the same name and the undisputed boss of the Vibo Valentia area, now in the maximum security prison of Nuoro serving hard time (41 bis).²⁶ We have already mentioned this case, originally filed as a "suicide" and recently reopened by the DDA.²⁷

Following Tita's death is the station – not tragic, but painful nonetheless – of Giusy.

²⁴ Monica Angelini, Giulia Rodari, Marzio Balzarini, Tommaso Marelli, Federico Beltrami, Morgana Chittari and Martina Mazzeo for the first degree hearing; Clemente La Porta, Fiammetta Di Stefano, Valerio Berra and Sara Manisera for the second.

²⁵ On the story of Lea Garofalo see Marcello Ravveduto, www.antimafiaduemila.com/home/mafie-news/254-focus/63139-lea-garofalo-la-scelta-di-una-donna-emancipata-uccisa-dalla-ndrangheta.html (November 24, 2016) and www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/articoli/Chi-era-Lea-Garofalo-testimone-di-giustizia (November 18, 2014). See also Marika Demaria, *La scelta di Lea. Lea Garofalo: la ribellione di una donna della 'ndrangheta*, Milano, Melampo Editore, 2013.

²⁶ For a better idea of the terrible history of the Mancuso *cosca*. See: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/%27Ndrina_Mancuso.

²⁷ For the story of *Tita* Buccafusca see footnote 197 of the present volume.

3.1 *Giuseppina Pesce*

On September 16, 2011, the case of *Giuseppina Giusy Pesce* – wife, niece and daughter of the bosses of Rosarno, mother of three children (born in 1995, 2001 and 2006, respectively) – filled the Italian newspapers, causing a great uproar, especially given the powerful *'ndrina* to which the protagonist belonged. At that time, because both parents were imprisoned for a long period of time, the then President of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Grazia Maria Grieco, had signed a decree limiting their parental rights and remanding custody of the children to the Social Services office of the town of Rosarno, the family's place of residence. The subsequent decree on September 21, 2011 updated the mother's situation, thanks to a note from the Department of Public Safety of the Ministry of the Interior, confirming "admission to a provisional witness protection plan for *Giuseppina Pesce* and her minor children"²⁸ and declaring "that information received today must in principle be evaluated positively toward a full recovery of the aforementioned *Pesce's* parental rights",²⁹ and as a consequence,

the Court revokes the restrictive measures limiting parental rights, adopted with respect to *Giuseppina Pesce*, and entrusts her children to the Central Protective Services of the Department of Public Safety of the Ministry of the Interior, for immediate entry into the witness protection program.³⁰

The result of the case would be entrusted to the newly-elected President Di Bella who, in the decree which he signed February 7, confirmed the previous sanctions and added a fundamental piece of information, i.e. that *Giuseppina Pesce*, speaking in a hearing on November 22, 2011 before the Juvenile Court in Rome, had chosen to

collaborate with the law in order to guarantee her children a future away from the criminal environment in which they apparently had been living³¹

while the father instead persisted

in his adherence to a culture of *omertà* typical of the mafia of which he is an alleged member and does not appear to have valid prospects for the proper upbringing of his children.³²

²⁸ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree n. 280/11 R.G. Vol. Giur., September 21, 2011, p. 1.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 2.

³¹ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree n. 280/11 R.G. Vol. Giur., February 7, 2012, p. 2.

³² *Ibidem*.

In sum: three children of imprisoned parents, belonging to one of the most ferocious families of the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta, were first entrusted exclusively to Social Services in their home town. Then, due to the mother’s newly discovered desire to help them have a better future by collaborating with the State, they were entrusted – this time also including the mother when she finished her prison sentence – to Social Services in a secured location, away from Calabria and from their criminal and bloody biological family. Giuseppina Pesce’s decision was not without pain: she turned informant, retracted her confession, then repented once again and has continued to defy the ‘Ndrangheta in the name of her children. Marked as a rat, she has provoked the wrath of her *‘ndrina*, including retaliation and revenge. Giuseppina Pesce tells that when she first began to collaborate with the law her children were starved by their grandparents and the youngest, only seven years old, was beaten with a belt for months by his paternal grandfather and beaten in public by his seventeen-year-old cousin, because “*his mother was a rat.*”³³

Today Giusy lives with her three children in protective custody in a secret location, with false identities: her life choice seems to have led to positive change.

Not so for her cousin *Cetta* in whom she found her inspiration.

3.2 *Maria Concetta Cacciola*, known as *Cetta*

The last station conveying the true desperation of ‘Ndrangheta women occurred on August 20, 2011, with the death of thirty-one-year-old Maria Concetta *Cetta* Cacciola by hydrochloric acid, which took place in the bathroom of her home. The young Calabrian wife and mother of three children (born in 1995, 1998, and 2004, respectively) had become a State’s witness and entered witness protection. But she was forced to abandon her secure location in northern Italy and return to her hometown of Rosarno, in Calabria, because of blackmail by her parents and brother (later suspects for mistreatment and for incitement to suicide) in which her children were treated as a commodity for extortion. The case of this woman, a daughter and mother from a family linked to the mafia, has had an enormous impact on public opinion, and her death was not in vain.

It was precisely from this episode, in relation to the three motherless children, that the unprecedented, revolutionary legal and social program promoted by President Di Bella and assisted by the work of Prosecutor Latella took flight.

³³ Andreana Illiano, *Il baby collaboratore che scuote la ‘Ndrangheta*, October 6, 2015, cit.

The concerns generated by Cetta's suicide spurred Democratic congresswoman Laura Garavini to bring about a parliamentary inquiry by virtue of which the Juvenile Court has requested a Social Services investigation into the Cacciola home – where at that time Cetta's parents resided – to assess the conditions in which the three children were living, due to their mother's death and their father's imprisonment for mafia-related crimes. Social Services did not note any mistreatment. The case was closed. But on February 4, 2012, when the Preliminary Investigative Judge of Palmi, Fulvio Accursio, issued an arrest warrant for Michele Cacciola, his wife Anna Rosalba Lazzaro, and their son Giuseppe, it was evident what role the three children had had in the affair.

The definitive milestone came with the March 6, 2012 decree, which prohibits any contact between the children and their relatives, and revokes the parental rights of the Father, Cetta's widower. The Court felt compelled to remove the couple's three children³⁴

from a particularly stressful situation, due to family dynamics that are distorted and permeated by mafia culture, culminating in the father's incarceration (convicted for mafia crimes according to Art. 416 bis c.p. and others) and in the shocking suicide of the mother, Maria Concetta Cacciola.

In particular, for this last episode the grandparents Michele Cacciola and Anna Rosalba Lazzaro, to whom the children had been entrusted, as well as their maternal uncle Giuseppe Cacciola, are being investigated and are currently in preventive custody.³⁵

For this reason, the Court

entrusts the minors to the local Social Services, with a mandate to ensure these same [*omissis*] all necessary assistance, support and supervision. The Court delegates to the agencies indicated above [...] the further task of providing the children with immediate foster care in a family home to be located preferably outside of the province of Reggio Calabria.³⁶

To understand the importance of the Court's decision it is necessary to scrutinize this document which, in bits and pieces, reveals the life of a woman and her three children. Here resound the desperate words of Cetta (already in Genoa, far from home thanks to the witness protection program) after having broken the code of her family, full members of the organized crime ring of Rosarno, in the heart of

³⁴ The Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree, March 6, 2012, signed by President Di Bella, pp. 1-14, p. 13.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 2.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 12.

the Piana di Gioia Tauro region. Her father, Michele Cacciola, is brother-in-law of boss Gregorio Bellocco and boasts an extensive criminal record. His example was followed, with great success, by his son Giuseppe – the brother most feared by Cetta – whose résumé includes various crimes (mafia association, loan sharking, arms trafficking) and jail time. Cetta recounts – offering a cross-section of the results of a poor mafia upbringing – that Giuseppe is “*pig-headed*”, because he “*grew up around adults from the time of his youth*” and thus has won the “*respect*” of his peers. *Respect* that at a certain point he risked losing because of his sister. Because of the shame of her double betrayal: first toward her husband in jail and then toward her family. The husband: a violent type who, in an arrangement by the respective families, she had met at thirteen years old and married at sixteen. Cetta did not love her husband and had realized very quickly that he did not love her either: he had married her in order to enter into her family’s mafia circle and to make a career for himself. Three children. A stressful life. Then her husband went to jail for mafia crimes, doing hard time (41 bis) and, after years of solitude and relentless torments, a new man appeared on the horizon, thanks to the internet. And she dreamed of and fought for a new life. She feared *all of them*, and *none of them* let her out of their sight, not even for an instant. She lived in a rough environment, cruel and suffocating, with rules that were clear from childhood. The family home, her parents living on the second floor. So they could control her always and in every way. She was not even allowed to accompany her children to school. Then came that attempt, which began online and covertly, a long-distance relationship, another *chance*. But her father commanded that “*she had to stay with her husband forever.*” And when the *pater familias* of an ‘Ndrangheta family speaks, his word is law. Her brother goes wild searching for evidence so he could catch the two lovers and make them pay dearly, according to the code of honor which he upholds. As soon as he finds proof, he will kill both of them. Cetta knows this scenario by heart. For this reason, she lives in constant anxiety, and every time that her brother comes into the house, she trembles. Because “*sooner or later my brother I will say: ‘Come with me,’ and at that point I know I will disappear.*” She told all of this and more, with chilling detail, to the *Carabinieri* when she went to the barracks on the pretext of reporting the theft of her teenage son’s scooter. From there begins her *Passion* and her *Calvary*.³⁷ The decree quotes excerpts from a letter Cetta wrote to

³⁷ For further information, see the many articles that appeared in the February 8, 2014 edition of the weekly newspaper *L'Espresso*. In particular, see the two articles by Lirio Abate, titled: “La storia. Maria Concetta Cacciola sognava la libertà. Per questo era destinata a morire. Una donna che non si è piegata al volere della famiglia, del marito e della 'ndrangheta. Così scriveva all'uomo con cui voleva fuggire: ‘So che se torno a casa ti ho perso. I miei non perdonano l'onore e la dignità e io, per loro, li ho traditi entrambi’”; (The story. Maria Concetta Cacciola dreamed of freedom. For this reason she was destined to die. A woman who won't bend to the will of her family, her husband and the 'Ndrangheta. So she wrote to the man with whom she wanted to flee: “I know that if I go back home I am done. My family thinks only of honor and dignity and in their

her mother, her *ultima Thule*, – May 2011 – in which she asks her mother to take care of her three children, because they will never allow her, a faithless turncoat, to take them with her.

The document emphasizes that

confirmation of such instrumental conduct – seriously detrimental to minors – is found in these same confidences – captured during a conversation – made by Maria Concetta Cacciola to her friend A. L. (“I tried to find them and they won’t give them to me...you understand? They won’t send the children to me... don’t you see that they won’t send them to me?...they know that if they send me the children it’s over, I won’t come back”).³⁸

Cetta writes, admonishing her mother not to make “*the same error*” with Cetta’s children that she had made with her:

do not make the mistake with them that you made with me...give them space...if you keep them shut in it is easy to make a mistake, because they feel like prisoners in everything. Give them what you have not given me.³⁹

Cetta begs her not to leave her children “*with them*”, referring to the other members of her family (father included), because they are “*not worthy*”, and she begs her mother to keep her memory alive in her children:

Do not give them to their father, he is not worthy of them... talk about me with them, do not leave them to those people... they are not worthy.⁴⁰

She asks her mother in particular to look after her eldest son, perfectly aware of the devastating effect that mafia mis-education has already had on him:

because in the end it is unfortunate that has dealt with this from childhood...it is for this reason that he has the character that he does...he is weaker.”⁴¹

minds I have betrayed both”); and “Ndrangheta. Maria Concetta Cacciola uccisa per non farla parlare. Arrestati i genitori. Le accuse della DDA che hanno portato all'arresto dei familiari della donna, collaboratrice di giustizia e madre di tre figli, e di due avvocati. Per i PM (Pubblico Ministero) fu costretta a bere acido muriatico simulando poi un suicidio” (‘Ndrangheta. They killed Maria Concetta Cacciola to silence her. Parents arrested. The allegations of the DDA which have led to the arrest of family members of the woman, a State’s witness and mother of three children, and of two lawyers. According to the PM (Public Prosecutor) she was forced to drink hydrochloric acid, simulating a suicide). (Available online: www.espresso.repubblica.it).

³⁸ Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, Decree, March 6, 2012, cit., pp. 4-5.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

The mother is deaf to the daughter's requests. Cetta returns to Rosarno, not able to handle the separation from her children. But, guilty of having "repented" and having betrayed her husband and her clan, she dies at the hand of her family members, forced into silence by swallowing hydrochloric acid. In March 2012, with the measure signed by Di Bella, the three children were removed from their paternal family. The incarcerated father lost his parental rights. The grandparents' rights were also revoked. At first the three children were fostered in a family home, and subsequently a relative took them in. The two girls, with the assistance of a psychologist, are now completing rehabilitation. The firstborn, now an adult, returned to live in his hometown.

The case of Cetta's sons is an important forerunner, and represents the cornerstone from which began the legal and social action which is the subject of this essay.

With our reading of the measures we've seen thus far, we can piece together the blocks of an atrocious mosaic. With a *mafia* family living in a *mafia environment* impregnated with *mafia culture*, nothing other than the *mafia* can come of it. The children of *mafiosi* are young people condemned to their fate. According to *mafia* pedagogy, children are the *property* of the parents who have the task of preparing them for a criminal life. The pedagogy of *dishonor* imposes deviant lifestyles and behavioral models founded on violence and bullying, based on submission to indisputable rules. The rules were established long ago, in the name of *respect* for the family, customs and tradition. Since "*it has always been this way*", it becomes normal (and therefore legitimate) to perpetuate violence, lawlessness and crimes, without questioning what is right and how steep a price the victims should pay.

In order to remove the minors from harassment, ill-treatment, destructive psychological terrorism, and incitement to live brutal life by their own families, the juvenile court of Reggio is pursuing its battle, despite hostile reactions and death threats against Di Bella, members of the Court, and the Public Prosecutor. The action of the juvenile courts is made possible by the courage of mothers who, following the examples of the late Lea, Tita, and Cetta, are increasingly first in line to stand up for their own rights and those of their children, removing themselves and their children from the deadly shadow of the ruling family.

The State, legislators, judges, the judicial system, school, Social Services – in order to truly upend the foundations of the mafia system, all must intervene with solidarity and cohesiveness toward this common goal.

⁴¹ *Ibidem.*

Some of these mothers we have already encountered in the preceding pages. Let us now review some other recent cases.

4. Fiat Lux

4.1 Mother Courage

On October 13, 2015, a thirty-five-year-old woman presented herself to the Juvenile Court of Reggio. She asked timidly to meet with the President. She had heard about Roberto Di Bella, about his *Free to choose* protocol, about his campaign to free children born to the mafia. This is the verbal statement that she made spontaneously, a deep dive into the muck and mire of the mafia:

I am the mother of Rosario, 15 years of age, and the sister of Alessandro, whom the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria already convicted for murder back in the '90s and who is now serving life imprisonment for another homicide. I am the sister of Francesco, convicted for assaulting a *Carabiniere*, and I am the sister of Umberto and daughter of Antonio, both of whom were recently killed in a mafia ambush. I came here because of the criminal trial against my son Rosario, which will be held today: I want to voice my strong concerns as a mother for the fate of my children and in particular that of Rosario and his little brother, age thirteen. My son is in the courtroom, and he does not know that I am here with you, President.

I fear he could end up in prison or killed, like my father and my brother Umberto or like my father-in-law. My family has been involved in numerous local 'Ndrangheta feuds, with many murders as a result. Even my cousin and his eleven-year-old son were killed. My two children are rebellious, violent, run with a bad crowd, are fascinated by the 'Ndrangheta and are obsessed with weapons, despite their young age. I am afraid that they will commit crimes and go down a road with no return. My son Rosario thinks that going to jail is an honor and thinks that it will earn him more respect, but in reality he doesn't know what prison is like and what could happen to him there...

I am not able to control my children, despite my efforts, and I ask the Juvenile Court to help them so that they can have a different future from that of my father, my husband and my brothers. Please, send my children away from Reggio Calabria; I want them to be held to strict rules because otherwise they will have no respect for anything, and I am not able to exercise my authority as a mother. Please understand how painful this decision is for me, that for the first time I am speaking to a judge, but it is the only solution, because I want my

children to have a peaceful life, different from my own and that of my family. In my family there is no one, no one I can trust...

The relevant office declares, immediately below the cited text, that her statement was suspended “because the woman, crying, displayed a feeling of profound emotional crisis.”⁴²

Who are these children, these *children of the mafia*? They are children who are manipulated, brainwashed, lost to themselves, adrift. Little ones who have been stripped of their childhood. The scattered reflections of Roberto Di Bella are shocking, more than just depressing, and they render the reality of the situation quite well:

They might have material goods, but they are emotionally poor. I observed that their names were always the same, they were the sons of the bosses I had sentenced fifteen years earlier. What sort of acquaintances can the son of a boss be expected to have? There is a lack of opportunities to develop his own personality. Everyone considers you, reveres you as the son of someone. Ours is not a recipe for salvation; we are simply trying to provide an alternative. When they become adults, then they can choose what to do. The school is just as important as the work (in progress) of legality and equality (of gender and integration between cultures). The ‘Ndrangheta is inherited. The control of territory is sustained through generational continuity. They are indoctrinated, destined for certain death or imprisonment. If you are born in San Luca you cannot choose a different path if you are not aware of its existence. This happens because of the lack of alternatives. You must provide an alternative – there is a cultural alternative. They must free themselves from their parents’ footsteps. Calabrian society must develop a series of antibodies. These kids were denied an adolescence. They learn by necessity to control their emotions and not to betray them. They have affective disorders: they never cry. Often they use a refined Italian. They control their emotions. The kids are already adults, accustomed to suffering, they have no father in whom to confide. It is a cultural phenomenon that is self-sustaining within families. They become irredeemable. They are just normal kids who in that situation have no alternatives. They are the bearers of suffering, always depressed. They are unable to experience their adolescence.⁴³

Being aware of the problem always leads to the need to develop a hypothesis in order to resolve it. Growing up in a mafia environment causes negative actions. The incidence of multiple pedagogical factors results in a truly criminal

⁴² The Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, *minutes* from October 13, 2015, p. 1. The names listed have been suitably modified according to the Italian law.

⁴³ Di Bella’s information was issued to the office note taker during a meeting.

upbringing. Only by understanding the salient features of the mafia world and upbringing can we fight it by dismantling it and proposing alternatives of change, both individual and social, in the wake of renewed educational proposals that are respectful of the individual and of civil society.⁴⁴

The project *Free to choose* was developed in order to mobilize civil society. The removal of these minors represents the closing of a circle: from the mothers, to the children, and back to the mothers. The path has already been paved, and Reggio Calabria lay the first paving stones. The so-called ‘Calabrian Spring,’ the phenomenon of female collaboration with the Law, is only the input of a process occurring within the ‘Ndrangheta. If children are the driving force for collaboration with the State – while at the same time representing its Achilles’ heel – it is upon them that we must focus in order to eradicate the problem at its root. The ‘Ndrangheta needs recruits: they are guaranteed these recruits by raising them from childhood. The State must intervene at this crucial point. The cases handled by the Court of Reggio are certainly not sufficient to dismantle the whole system; still, it is a good start. But the judges cannot succeed on their own. We must create a network in support of this path: this, as we have seen, is the goal of *Free to choose*. The plan, now a governmental accord, involves a multidisciplinary team that aligns the judiciary with psychologists, educators and volunteers of *Libera*, the Italian branch of *Caritas*, and the associations *Giovanni XXIII* and *Addiopizzo Messina*. Also at its foundation is the involvement of juvenile justice services, local entities and school offices, and professional employment agencies. If the project takes flight with the addition of State funding, what are now just tiny sprouts will later produce large fruits. And they would pull the rug out from under the feet of the ‘ndrine in Calabria and throughout Italy.⁴⁵

As of today there have been forty children from ‘Ndrangheta families to enter the Juvenile Court’s program. And, as a positive sign of change, Di Bella recounts that an ever-increasing number of ‘Ndrangheta women contact him directly, circumventing family and middle men (including family and court lawyers as well as mediators) and come to him to alert him about their concerns and learn what he can do for their children’s futures. The case records are varied. Among these children there are true criminals involved in killings, robberies, and petty crimes. The State, using the legal tool created by Di Bella, can intervene up to a certain point, i.e. up to the termination of parental rights of the father (and, in some very

⁴⁴ For further information see the article by Mario Schermi, *L’educazione criminale: crescere in contesti mafiosi*, www.pensamultimedia.it, 2013, ISBN: 1121-1717-04-13-art3.

⁴⁵ On this issue see works by journalist Michela Mancini, who graduated from the University of Rome La Sapienza in publishing and journalism with a thesis entitled *Cose di famiglia: figli ostaggio della ‘Ndrangheta*.

serious cases, even of the mother) and granting custody of the children to foster homes and Social Services. But it is precisely after this point that the State continues to be absent: the future for these young people is a leap in the dark. Voluntary associations, as we have seen, provide aid. First and foremost, as always in the anti-mafia fight, is Don Ciotti's *Libera*. A greater State presence after the initial legal action is indispensable, and this is the substance of the agreement signed on July 1, 2017. The witness protection system for mothers and children fleeing from the 'Ndrangheta must be extended and strengthened. We have seen that deficiencies in this area took the life of Lea Garofalo and have had disastrous consequences for Tita Buccafusca and Cetta Cacciola. On the other hand, the case of Giuseppina Pesce is a good example to take as a model: her three children have been able to join their mother in protective custody. In such cases, the decision of the Reggio judges is necessary not only for the protection of minors, but also to ensure the mothers' continued collaboration with the Law. Knowing that they can bring their children with them encourages women to free themselves from their birth families. The 'Ndrangheta fears this loss much more than law enforcement sting operations. What scares them most is the removal of children from their families. Without soldiers, what kind of army will the 'Ndrangheta have? How will it function? In one of the interceptions related to the Cacciola case, the father Michele (who played an active role in the discrediting and the horrific death of his daughter Cetta) says:

“I had a family that... that made me the envy of everyone. Look at these unworthy pieces of shit, look! I used to enjoy watching these grandchildren. Those days when no one was happier than I, no one was happier than I. At least they left me these kids, but they took my daughter. These unworthy people, they take children from their parents, from their parents... you can take children from their parents, where is this law? Is this a law? In order to fight me you take my daughter?! To fight against me?!”⁴⁶

Words cannot express the importance of these anti-mafia measures aimed at saving children from the mafias. Take from Caesar that which is not of Caesar – because Caesar does not deserve it – this is the road we must continue to travel. And despite attacks, threats and slander, Di Bella's program is the right path, as proven, first and foremost, by mothers of the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta.

⁴⁶ Michela Mancini, “Dalle madri ai figli. Se la 'ndrangheta perde i suoi soldati”, February 28, 2014, (www.antimafiaduemila.com).

4.2 White Widows

Important in this regard is the recent phenomenon of “white widows” (Di Bella). These are ‘Ndrangheta women between twenty and forty years of age with young children, all of whom have *mafiosi* husbands sentenced to life imprisonment or lengthy incarceration, usually doing hard time (41 bis). Their husbands are in a living cemetery (prison) and their families, in turn, have imprisoned the wives in their own role by forbidding them to have external relationships (not even a mere conversation, let alone a sentimental attachment) and have condemned them to a life of solitude, harassment, physical violence and even worse if they try to rebel (as in the cases of Lea, Santa and Cetta). Recently, however, things are changing. News has spread that the judges can help people in difficulty, and some of these women are finding the courage to come to the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria in search of protection and assistance. Di Bella has noted that

thanks also to our measures, we are beginning to realize that children are moldable, and what seems like an impenetrable family society is not quite so indestructible. We are shaking up these families from their very foundations. They are verifying this new situation as well. We have mothers who are asking us for help. Sometimes in secret, crying, desperate. They come to us so that we will take care of their children and, after difficult depositions and many considerations and reconsiderations, they ask to be “liberated” and for assistance in leaving Calabria along with their children or following their children whom we have already removed. Some have begun to collaborate with the law, while others want help dissociating and gaining their freedom without active collaboration. They leave and then return, always in secret, and ask us to remove their kids, ask us to help them leave Calabria with their children. These are very important signs, unthinkable just a few years ago. At the moment there are about a dozen collaborations and dissociations, but the list is destined to get longer because we have several cases in process.⁴⁷

These words are an encouraging sign for all those women dedicated to this undertaking and forced to live for years under constant guard with enormous responsibilities and restrictions on their private lives. But beyond any personal-psychological considerations the phenomenon of “white widows” represents an important fact indicating cracks in the solid shell within which the ‘Ndrangheta has always functioned. The daughters, sisters, and wives of bosses who today are choosing to get help from the State attest, from within the ‘Ndrangheta, to the validity of the actions by the Court and the Juvenile District Attorney in Reggio Calabria.

⁴⁷ Declarations by Di Bella written on July 20, 2017.

Di Bella emphasizes:

It is a growing phenomenon that we are no longer seen as an enemy institution but as a last resort in a sea of illegality, imprisonment and suffering. It is a completely new psychological and social situation, and beyond our volunteers, we are in need of a regulatory and judicial network to support us.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Quoted from the article by Roberto Galullo, “A Reggio Calabria. Provvedimenti dal 2012. Linea dura per togliere i figli alla ‘ndrangheta”, *Il Sole 24 ore*, January 16, 2017, p. 7.

CHAPTER FIVE: EXULTATE JUSTI



1. Intimidation and threats

Di Bella's last words, still hopeful in January 2017 (when the article quoting him was published), have proved prophetic: we witnessed it become a reality on July 1, 2017, following the signing of the ministerial accord *Free to choose*. We have also seen, at the end of October 2017, the important request made by the CSM to the legislature to proceed with the promulgation of such a law. But the road is still long and hard. The action of the Reggio judiciary, since its first manifestation in 2012, was met with mountains of written threats and actions both real and symbolic by its detractors. If, according to the Court, each decree represents protection for minor children as well as hope for the family, for the 'Ndrangheta it is an attack on their parental rights, to their sense of belonging to a family, to their values. The forty impeccable and irreproachable court rulings in Reggio have unleashed an uproar within the family *cosche*. The 'Ndrangheta obviously do not want the State interfering in their business, let alone within their own biological family, and they will not tolerate the idea that the right to raise a child can – because of their own delinquency – be delegated to the State. The Court rulings have triggered a thirst for revenge that has led to an escalation of threats and intimidation against the juvenile judges and magistrates of Reggio, beyond the complaints against those judicial proceedings. It is a fact that the Court in Reggio is small and provincial, with just four seated judges, in an area with a frightening percentage of mafia crime. The Juvenile District Attorney and Court, located in the same building in the heart of the city, are an easy target and should be a source of concern for the (too often indifferent) governmental authorities. The words of Prosecutor Latella, “our building is left to its own devices”, say a lot about the state of things; and those with a good memory unfortunately cannot help but remember the complaints made by Judge Giovanni Falcone: of the loneliness and isolation on the part of colleagues and governmental authorities in the fight against the mafia. This is the principal thesis of the Juvenile Court that,¹ due to the remarkable number of incidents against them, in June 2016 organized a debate open to colleagues and to the press, so that the discussion could help to ease the sense of isolation.

¹ District Attorney Giuseppina Latella, President of the Court Roberto Di Bella, and Public Prosecutor Roberto Di Palma.

The figure of the judge and juvenile magistrate, particularly in a context such as Reggio, a “reality of associative criminality” (Di Bella), is very exposed, “high profile” (Latella).² A bulwark of legality in a territory where criminality dominates, working in a very delicate terrain: in defense of the youngest and most fragile. But sometimes there is a silver lining to a bad situation.

2. Boomerang and Obstacles

Despite the gravity of the situation, the aforesaid episodes have had limited success from the point of view of the media, among law enforcement, and in the public opinion. Indeed, the repeated threats to the Court and to the Juvenile District Attorney have had a boomerang effect on those who make them with hopes to intimidate, silence, and shut down people and institutions. The cowardly acts taking place in the shadows stand in opposition to courageous protest in full daylight. On June 7, 2016 the District Juvenile Chamber of Reggio Calabria, which brings together lawyers specialized in the protection of minors and the most important trade associations involved in the defense of human rights and the law, recognized the importance of the activities carried out by the judiciary and members of Reggio’s juvenile justice system in the protection of minors and their future, and it launched a sit-in and protests in support of the institution. This was an important moment in which president Di Bella insisted on the need to for networking, because isolation kills: “We must not be afraid to talk about it because our silence only plays into their hands.” It is necessary to break the mafia rule of silence against those who threaten:

We must go out and have the courage to point the finger at these families and say clearly that their children are not their property, they are here in this world to be loved, not to become weapons to be used to their liking.³

And he offered his thanks to the large audience present to provide support and community:

I thank you, your presence comforts us. We are human beings, we are afraid too but we must move forward. We have mapped out our path.⁴

² According to the words of Giuseppina Latella,

³ Roberto Di Bella. Quote from the article by Valeria Guarniera in *Il dispaccio*, June 7, 2016, <http://ildispaccio.it/reggio-calabria/111646-reggio-uniti-con-tribunale-dei-minori-silenzio-fa-il-gioco-di-chi-minaccia>.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

A path undertaken by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria, fraught with obstacles and resistance, as emphasized by Di Bella:

There have been many bureaucratic difficulties, there are no funds and every time that we intervene to protect these children we must recreate a new plan from scratch. But now we have reached a stage where we can no longer improvise. We first need the public opinion to create consent, to begin to make people understand that the responsibility of raising children is a serious matter.⁵

He uses strong words to describe the situation:

We have whole families who ruin their own children and we are seeing it daily, because there is great suffering. Kids who are already resigned because they know what is in store for them. Resigned mothers and parents who, despite everything, continue to push them toward this fate.⁶

The work that they are doing, he maintains, is laborious and delicate, but it is finally producing benefits: “Something is changing” (Di Bella). The Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria is at the forefront of the fight against the ‘Ndrangheta as regards removing children from harmful environments that oppress the area and the people who live there. But Di Bella also makes an appeal that the responsibility for so delicate a job not be placed on the shoulders of a few individuals, and he repeats his mantra:

Events like this are very welcome, isolation and overexposure are both very dangerous. So I would like to repeat that these events are positive because they raise awareness, but it is important that they do so at even higher levels: the system must be regulated from the legislative point of view, and then we have to give a shape, a social continuity to this project. We need workers who are truly capable of tackling this phenomenon.⁷

It is the hope that now, after July 1, 2017, things really will change and the State will implement what it has promised and signed.

Commenting, against critics and detractors of his project, on the importance of removal from a diseased environment that would likely frustrate any attempt put in place to save these boys, Di Bella explains:

If we remove these kids from Calabria, it’s certainly not because we distrust the local workers: this distancing provides them the

⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ *Ibidem.*

opportunity to experience different lifestyles and also to ensure the continuity of their paths of recovery and legality. We need a system that can get up to speed as soon as possible. And then we need to ensure job opportunities for these kids who come back to us – finally having recognized the positive role of the State – to ask for help. And it is very difficult to give them answers. We must all do something more.⁸

It is now clear to the reader that the children whom the Reggio Court wants to support are not the typical children of ordinary poverty, hardship and violence, but are the sons of the mafia, new ‘Ndrangheta recruits, heirs of the bosses. They are children and adolescents who, as we have seen, already know how to shoot a gun at age nine, ask for a Kalashnikov at age twelve, are familiar with weapons, prepare and sell drugs, and collect extortions at age fourteen, kill at age sixteen. Therefore, the intervention of the Juvenile Court of Reggio becomes a crucial act against the ‘Ndrangheta, as Prosecutor Latella also reiterates, because it gets right into the heart of the family’s structure and acts on behalf of the child while undermining the very foundation on which organized crime rests. On the other hand, we have seen that the Court’s intervention works at the same time to awaken the consciences of ‘Ndrangheta women, also victims of the same system. “Something is changing”, repeats Di Bella. It is true, although it is not an easy road. Too often the mafia mentality is already so deeply ingrained in the way children and mothers think and perceive as to be ineradicable.

By reading the words of the judges, however, we see the internal paradox, the suffering of individuals who feel, on the one hand, a sense of belonging to a mafia family and, on the other, the need to be free of it. Last but not least, and hopefully the harbinger of good news and hopes, another sentiment is taking the foot and influencing, at the ground level, the sons of mafiosi saved by the Juvenile Court: refusal. The refusal to return to their beautiful but accursed land, Calabria, with the desire to remain in a different place “where everything is clearer than here”, according to one of the saved youths who escaped from the many who instead have remained submerged in the mafia miasma.

3. Voices from prison

In closing, a last new tile to add to the mosaic, built piece by piece by the Juvenile Court of Reggio. To the children – such as the baby-collaborator V. and his two siblings, R.C., or the two siblings D. and N., all children of mafia bosses – and the mothers – from those killed by the mafia such as Lea, Santa and Cetta to the

⁸ Di Bella, in a private correspondence with the author, July 20, 2017.

others, all wives of bosses, who are now under State protection with their children – we may now add, *exultate justis*, the fathers of the ‘Ndrangheta.

On August 10, 2016, from the maximum security prison in which he is imprisoned in accordance with 41 bis, a brutal boss of the ‘Ndrangheta in Reggio, whose name I must withhold in order to protect his children, gave the following statement during an official interrogation before the Honorary Judge:⁹

A.D.R.¹⁰ My name is [omissis], neither my lawyer nor a court-appointed lawyer is present. I have been informed of my right to a lawyer, but I intend to answer questions anyway.

A.D.R.: I am particularly grateful to the judge and the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria because they gave my children the chance to live in an environment other than the one in which they grew up and gave them the possibility of a better future, with civilized values and legality.

A.D.R.: I last saw my sons in January 2016. With respect for the decree providing for the physical and mental health of my children, I would like to have contact with my children by phone, letters and visits. I do not know where they are and I do not want to know: I only want to know that they are doing well. I do not want to be misunderstood, I will respect the court provisions, but I would like to have contact as their father, while still respecting them and the court rulings. Maybe I could see them every three or four months, and if they write to me I would be willing to write to the Juvenile Court, Social Services, or the lawyer who protects my children, to whoever would give me permission to write and how often. Currently I cannot contribute to the maintenance of my children, but if and when I could I would be happy to do so. Letters without a return address cannot be delivered here, but I can ask if it can be authorized that my children write only their names [without their address] to protect their secure location, since the post here is checked both incoming and outgoing. Alternatively, as far as talks, I would like to be able to talk to them on the phone for ten minutes once a month, and since I am under 41 bis my calls are recorded and they can bring my children to wherever they feel it is best to call.

⁹ He is the undisputed leader of the *cosca* [omissis] which is federated with another formidable group, and has been condemned for the crimes of mafia association, extortion and others with a definitive sentence of eighteen years. He was also investigated for serious violent crimes, just like his elderly father who is serving a sentence for murder. And again in another trial, he was sentenced to another eighteen years, though the sentence has not yet been finalized, as he must await the judgment of the Appellate Court. In essence: his sentence will be nearly life-long. The quotes in the text are taken from the minutes of the hearing on August 10, 2016, with place and names omitted.

¹⁰ ‘A.D.R.’ stands for “A domanda risponde” (responding to a question).

Following this are signatures notarizing the minutes. This is an unprecedented and emblematic case: an ‘Ndrangheta boss who for the first time shows gratitude toward the Juvenile Court which has taken away his children. After many threats, intimidations large and small, attacks and insults:¹¹

This is an important step and may not be the only one. There are other things brewing as well...¹²

It is important that these are the words of a mafia boss doing 41 bis, not an informant, the father of children who have been removed, and he contradicts, from within the ‘Ndrangheta system, the characterization of Di Bella as “playing fast and loose with the law” or as a “child thief.”

4. Concluding reflections

I conclude with some reflections on the situation as it stands while I write these final pages. The Juvenile Court and District Attorney’s office of Reggio continue their strenuous commitment to the project. On Saturday, October 14, 2017, while in Catanzaro speaking at the thirty-sixth National Congress of the Italian Association of Magistrates for Children and Families, Di Bella reiterated:

They have called me a “child thief”, but we use this tool only when there is a definitive injury to the mental and physical wellbeing of the children. At the core of our action is solely the protection of the child.¹³

Once temporarily removed from their families, the children, as we have seen, are entrusted to the care of associations, such as Libera or Unicef, and in some cases also to volunteer foster families. Judge Di Bella has defined this path as an “Erasmus of legality”,¹⁴ through which

¹¹ The most recent challenge which the press has aimed at the CSM’s recent action in favor of Di Bella’s best practice (on CSM see footnote 121) – and it would be important to understand who orchestrated the press coverage – dates to October 28, 2017, and is available in *Il dubbio*: <file:///Users/animal/Desktop/The%20doubt%20Dear%20CSM,%20Slurried%20was%20Son%20of%20a%20boss%20but%20you%20rebelled%20a%20Father%20-%20The%20doubt.webarchive>

¹² Di Bella, in private correspondence with the author, June 17, 2017.

¹³ www.strill.it/primo-piano/2017/10/ndrangheta-giudice-di-bella-non-sono-ladro-di-bambini-do-loro-futuro-diverso/ (October 14, 2017).

¹⁴ *Ibidem*. *Erasmus* is an exchange program for students within the European Union offering study abroad learning and volunteer opportunities.

we try to offer the children a different world view from the one they know, one where violence is not the only answer and prison is not a mandatory career step.¹⁵

The President of the Reggio Court also emphasized the “extraordinary results”¹⁶ achieved in these few years:

Most of the children, after undertaking this difficult path, have resumed their studies, have taken on community service work or, in some cases, have begun to collaborate with the associations.¹⁷

Di Bella has therefore stressed the fundamental role played by the mothers of these ‘Ndrangheta children:

These are desperate women scarred by death and imprisonments; for them our court has become a last resort, the only hope of being able to save their children from a predetermined fate.¹⁸

Di Bella’s experience is not an isolated case. It is echoed by his colleague Patrizia Esposito, the president of the Juvenile Court of Naples – in Camorra territory – who was dealing with “kids with violent conduct beyond all extremes”.¹⁹ The judge explained the rise of the so-called *paranza dei bambini*,²⁰ gangs of young

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*. It should be noted that these statements were made eight months after the resounding decision made by the Juvenile Court of Naples, along the same lines as Di Bella’s project, which revoked parental rights from families affiliated with the Camorra clan Elia, removing six children between three and fourteen years of age who were assisting or had assisted with the packaging and sale of drugs in the area of Pallonetto di Santa Lucia in Naples. Four of the six children subject to the ruling are siblings, while a fifth is a cousin of the latter (www.prealpina.it, February 16, 2017). The Neapolitan juvenile justices have justified their decision in this way: “If they remain in their homes, entrusted to the care of their respective families, it would force them to stay in an extremely harmful situation” (www.ilmattino.it, cit., October 28, 2017).

²⁰ This expression was already in use in the nineteenth century, as we see from the title of the anonymous booklet *Natura ed origine della misteriosa setta della Camorra nelle sue diverse sezioni e paranze. Linguaggio convenzionale di essa, usi e leggi* (The Nature and Origins of the Mysterious Sect of the Camorra in its Various Sub-groups and Gangs), published in 1850 in Naples by Filippo Serafini. The term is taken up by the Swiss-born Italian writer and polygraph Marc Monnier, in his book *La Camorra. Notizie storiche raccolte e documentate* (The Camorra: A Collection and Documentation of Historical Information) Firenze, Barbéra, 1862), where he explains: “In Naples there were twelve centers, one for each district: each of these centers was subdivided into special *paranze* (gangs), which acted on behalf of them and formed their own possess” (p. 44. The edition cited is Marc Monnier, *La camorra*, edited by Felia Allum and Alessandro Colletti, Città di Castello (Perugia), Edizioni di Storia e Studi Sociali, 2014). The expression was incorporated into the title of Roberto Saviano’s book, *La paranza dei bambini* (Milano, Feltrinelli, 2016) which, along with *Bacio feroce* (Milano, Feltrinelli, 2017), is part of a short series of novels on children who wield criminal power within the Camorra. For the meaning

children who have filled the void left by certain clans after many arrests, with daily brutality and violence. She explained that the children of the Camorra

are kids who come from bad families with evil female role models who, during the periods of their husbands' incarceration, take over as boss.²¹

These declarations parallel those made about Sicily by Emma Seminara, President of the Juvenile Court of Catania, when, with regard to the Cosa Nostra children she had met, she spoke of ten-year-olds who

didn't know how to write, who had never celebrated a birthday, and who had received a gift from their family only to celebrate their first purse-snatching. When facing these situations it is impossible not to intervene, to protect the physical and mental wellbeing of the minor.²²

The quotations above offer a map of different locations and situations sharing the same devastating effects which the mafia subculture unleashes on children and on mothers.

To celebrate the day dedicated to juvenile courts and to the family, Attorney General of the State Beniamino Calabrese, and President of the Juvenile Court of Catanzaro Luciano Trovato, in support of the project Free to choose, have proclaimed

the willingness of the Province of Calabria [...] to approve a law that provides resources to create a veritable pool of anti-mafia educational foundations which will assist the minors in the paths laid out by the Calabrian courts.²³

The current shared desire on the part of the authorities to approve a national law for the benefit of mafia children is one of the most important results of the project initiated by Di Bella and his colleagues. To this is added the wellbeing of mothers

of the term *paranza* we refer to the definition in Treccani: "1. a. Coastal fishing boat [...] for fishing in pairs (in "*paranza*"), in which each "*paranza*" pulled one side of a trawl net. B. A motorized fishing boat that operates in tandem with another. C. Fishing net for bottom trawling [...] pulled by two small boats or "*paranze*", used especially in shallow waters. D. In cooking terminology, *fried p.*, a mixed fry of fish and small mollusks caught by "*paranze*". 2. Fig. In the jargon of the Neapolitan camorra, a group or gang of *camorristi*. B. In Rome, (archaic), a company of people joined by friendship, or associated in an undertaking, an affair, a work activity. In criminal jargon, a small group of con-men or thieves who work together" (www.treccani.it. My emphasis). In 2001, former lawyer and now author Diego De Silva has dedicated an important, very well written book to the children of the Camorra: *Certi bambini* (Torino, Einaudi).

²¹ www.strill.it/primo-piano/2017/10/ndrangheta-giudice-di-bella-non-sono-ladro-di-bambini-doloro-futuro-diverso/ (October 14, 2017)

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*. My emphasis.

and women, the other crucial result of this project, which is confirmed by the recent and vigorous request on the part of the then newly elected National Anti-mafia and Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor (previously chief prosecutor of Reggio Calabria) Federico Cafiero De Raho, that the State finally intervene to help women who are trying to escape from the mafia. De Raho emphasizes that their cases

are increasing significantly. I believe this is linked to the experimental program being carried out by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria. The Court removes the children from *cosche* families. It suspends parental rights in order to remove them and allow them to grow up in a different environment, with a new cultural upbringing. Many women are beginning to consider this possibility of a life away from violence and imprisonment.²⁴

The fact that, even today, there is no law to protect these women is, as De Raho remarks,

an issue which we have discussed repeatedly with various subsections of the State. As of now, only associations such as Libera and Caritas deal with the issue. They may not be enough. I am convinced that the State should find a way to guarantee a new identity to these women, a cover and a form of social assistance. They must not be left alone. They must have a home, a safe place and a new identity. They must be able to live another life.²⁵

The action taken by Di Bella is ever more visible. At the governmental level, thanks to the July 2017 agreement; at the legislative level, thanks to the October 2017 request by the CSM; at the political and legal level, thanks to events such as the one dedicated to the States General of the Fight Against the Mafia (SGLM), held in Milan on November 23-24, 2017, in which Di Bella presented his work for the first time before the most important Italian authorities;²⁶ at the level of cultural

²⁴ www.quotidianodelsud.it/calabria/cronache/cronaca/2017/09/15/de-raho-donne-stanno-scappando-mafia-ma-stato-non-pu-lasciarle.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ This event marked the conclusion of the work conducted between October 2016 and the end of May 2017, by a ministerial commission intended to update the tools used to fight the mafia. The event was hosted at Palazzo Reale, and the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella was present. It was organized by the Ministry of Justice in collaboration with the Municipality of Milan, and was attended by the highest authorities in the fight against the mafia and the most qualified journalists on the subject. Di Bella's speech in the second panel of the second day, entitled *A new awareness in the fight against the mafia*, has given rise to a broad consensus among insiders and the press. Minister of Justice Andrea Orlando, who provided opening and closing remarks, praised Di Bella's initiative before the President of the Republic. It is important to mention the list of participants on duty in those days: Giuseppe Sala, Mayor of Milan; Roberto Maroni, President of the Province of Lombardy; Federico Cafiero De Raho, National Anti-mafia and Anti-terrorism Prosecutor; Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission; Franco Roberti,

dissemination through the press and visual media: the Italian news and the film in production which will make known the situation to the public at large.²⁷ Last but

Coordinator of the Scientific Committee of the States General (previously National Anti-mafia and Anti-terrorism Prosecutor); Salvatore Rossi, Director General of the Bank of Italy; Pier Carlo Padoan, Minister of Economy and Finance; Alessandro Pansa, Director General of the Department of Information Security; Carla Del Ponte, Magistrate; Luigi Marini, the Italian Permanent Representative to the U.N., New York; Piero Grasso, President of the Senate; Nando Dalla Chiesa, sociologist; Salvatore Lupo, historian (University of Palermo); Nello Musumeci, President of the region of Sicily; Rosy Bindi, President of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on the Mafia Phenomenon; Giovanni Legnini, Vice President of the Superior Council of the Judiciary; Nicola Gratteri, State District Attorney at the Court of Catanzaro; Francesco Greco, State District Attorney at the Court of Milan; Giovanni Melillo, State District Attorney at the Court of Naples; Giuseppe Pignatone, State District Attorney at the Court of Rome; Roberto Scarpinato, General Prosecutor at the A Court of Appeal of Palermo; Gaetano Manfredi, President of the Conference of Rectors of Italian Universities (C.R.U.I.); Raffaele Cantone, President of the National Anti-Corruption Authority; Marco Minniti, Minister for the Interior; Maurizio Martina, Minister for Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies; Valeria Fedeli, Minister of University and Research Education. Among the journalists: Gad Lerner, Attilio Bolzoni, Marcelle Padovani, Enrico Deaglio, Liana Milella, and Luciano Fontana (current Director of *Il Corriere della Sera*).

²⁷ One notes that in Italy and beyond, the importance and urgency of Di Bella's revolution is continuously monitored by the principal national television channels, television and radio news outlets, influential newspapers (*Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa*, *Il Fatto quotidiano* to name a few). On February 11, 2017, Di Bella was interviewed by *Corriere della Sera*: "Il giudice che salva i figli dai boss: 'Sono le madri a chiedermelo'. Di Bella, il presidente del Tribunale per i minorenni celebrato dal «New York Times»: 40 i minori allontanati. Sperimentano la chance di una vita diversa dall'unica conosciuta nelle loro famiglie di 'ndrangheta, grazie ai provvedimenti civili di decadenza o limitazione della responsabilità genitoriale" (The judge who saves children from the mob: "It's the mothers who ask me to do it." Di Bella, President of the Juvenile Court and honored by the *New York Times*: forty children relocated. They are experiencing the chance at a life that is different from the only one they've known in their 'Ndrangheta families, thanks to the civil rulings limiting or revoking custodial rights from the parents. www.corriere.it/firme/luigi-ferrarella). For the first time on November 12, 2017, Rai3, one of the most followed national television channels, dedicated the final segment of the 7:00 pm news hour to Di Bella's case. See <http://www.raiplay.it/video/2017/11/TG3-5ed99250-cf52-41b1f6fe3c240.html> (segment at 30'33"). On December 12, 2017, Rai TGI aired the world premier "I said no" segment by Maria Grazia Mazzola. It is an exclusive interview with Alfonso Gallico, who was then twentyyears old, in which the youth speaks for the first time in public against the mafia to which his family belongs. He is the son of Rocco – one of the most terrifying bosses of the 'Ndrangheta, currently in prison doing 41 bis. The youth, who was himself in juvenile detention for mafia-related crimes, after following the path laid out for him by Di Bella, now says: "The mafia oppresses and suffocates." In December 2017, the prestigious national publishing house Treccani devoted a long essay to Di Bella's initiative in its annual volume *Il libro dell'anno* (The Book of the Year) 2017, written by Luigi Ferrarella. On February 2, 2018, the news that Di Bella's protocol *Free to choose* was signed by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, by the District Anti-Mafia Directive, and by the CEI, was widely reported by the national press: www.avveniredicalabria.it/2941/galantino, *Il segretario generale della CEI interviene alla firma del protocollo di intesa per il progetto 'Liberi di scegliere'. Galantino: «La Chiesa accanto a chi si dissocia dalle 'ndrine»*; [www.calabriaecclesia.org/Pages/NewsMondoDetail/6079/Il segretario generale della Cei interviene alla firma del protocollo di intesa per il progetto %27Liberi di Scegliere%27 Galantino «La Chiesa accanto a chi si dissocia dalle %27ndrine](http://www.calabriaecclesia.org/Pages/NewsMondoDetail/6079/Il_segretario_generale_della_Cei_interviene_alla_firma_del_protocollo_di_intesa_per_il_progetto_%27Liberi_di_Scegliere%27_Galantino_«La_Chiesa_accanto_a_chi_si_dissocia_dalle_%27ndrine»); www.radioinblu.it/2018/02/02/liberi-di-scegliere-il-nuovo-protocollo-dintesa-firmato-presso-la-direzione-nazionale-antimafia (by Marino Galdiero); www.ildispaccio.it/primopiano/1 "«Una concreta alternativa di vita ai minori vittime della criminalità organizzata»-firmato a Roma Protocollo d'Intesa". The prestigious *The*

not least, the February 2, 2018 memorandum of understanding *Free to choose* was signed, at the Rome offices of the District Anti-Mafia Directive, by the Presidency for the Council of Ministers, the anti-mafia association *Libera* and other Calabrian institutions, and for the first time gained the support of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI).²⁸

This book aims to provide readers with a greater understanding of the work carried out by Di Bella and Latella, as well as that of the Italian Parliament and the Parliament of the European Union, so that they may work more quickly to cooperate with the action initiated by the Court and by the Juvenile District Attorney of Reggio Calabria, followed by the juvenile courts of Catania and Naples, in the transformation of the currently regional law *Free to choose*, ratified by the Italian Government and supported by the CSM, into a national law and, finally, into a European directive to counteract the mafia at a broader and more effective level. This work acknowledges that, unlike pizza,²⁹ the mafia is a global phenomenon that affects all of us directly, and the devastating effects of which victimize the most fragile among us, including women and children.³⁰ Both

World Today dedicated its cover story to a report on Di Bella's case intitled "An Italian judge's radical plan. Helen Fitzwilliam outlines a protection programme to rescue women and children of the 'Ndrangheta, a mafia clan that kills those who dare to betray it." (February & March 2018, Volume 74, Number 1, by author Helen Fitzwilliam).

²⁸ The accord signed by the those days National Anti-Mafia Prosecutor Federico Cafiero De Raho, by the Undersecretary of the Presidency of the Council Maria Elena Boschi, equal opportunity delegate, by President of the Court of Reggio Calabria Roberto Di Bella, by District Attorney of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria Giuseppina Latella, by the District Attorney of the Court of Reggio Calabria Calogero Paci, and by the President of the *Libera* Association Don Luigi Ciotti, sanctions the task within the Calabrian province as a shared course of action. The aim is to activate a support network between the legal system, the regional government, and the associations, thus allowing for the protection and security of a concrete life alternative for oppressed minors coming from families involved in organized crime or who are the victims of mafia violence. This path, also firmly supported by the Italian Episcopal Conference with Secretary General monsignor Nunzio Galantino present at the signing, provides for the activation of a system of interventions (educational, psychological, logistical, academic, economic, and employment-based) within the organized crime environment of the province of Reggio Calabria, aimed at women, children and immediate family members subject to judicial measures by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria with the objective of guaranteeing concrete life alternatives. The current accord aims to open a broad perspective that will extend the above-mentioned tools to other judicial districts as well. "It is not simply collaboration, nor is it testimony, but rather a life choice. It is a clean break with respect to the mafia family model." So spoke Federico Cafiero De Raho, in an interview with Tg2000 News, following the memorandum of understanding by the National Anti-Mafia Directive for the support of women and children from organized crime families or who are victims of mafia violence.

²⁹ Alberto Varvaro (1934-2014), an authority in the field of Romance Philology, notoriously claimed that 'mafia' is the most used Italian term in the world, followed in second place by 'pizza.'

³⁰ On the disturbing role of the City of London that – enjoying a substantial extraterritoriality based on privileges in effect since 1191 – has become the heart of world finance due to low taxes, one should bear in mind the words of Gratteri and Nicaso: "The city has its own mayor, its own

Gratteri, among the most experienced magistrates in the fight against the ‘Ndrangheta, and Nicaso, a great expert on the ‘Ndrangheta worldwide, have repeatedly warned of the need for a global fight against the mafia and have reaffirmed that combating the mafia on a planetary scale every day is becoming more and more tiring: the differences between legal systems, the lack of involvement in criminal organizations and the difficulty of globalizing the fight, all encourage the mafias that instead manage increasingly to cooperate and function at an international level.³¹ However, cases like that of Di Bella on an Italian scale, along with the help of volunteer associations such as Libera and Addiopizzo, and those mentioned by Gratteri and Nicaso on a global scale, show us that fighting the mafia subculture is not an impossible task.³²

magistrates, its own police force. These are chosen by its eight thousand residents and businesses, including five hundred banks [...]. They are a city within the city who answer neither to the queen, nor to the government, nor to Parliament. Here you will find the most powerful and wealthiest economic institutions such as the Bank of England controlled by the Rothschilds, Lloyds of London, and the London Stock Exchange. Some statistics would help us to better understand the size of this revenue. According to a study by Transparency International UK, within six thousand square meters in the heart of London, there would be 36,324 properties ascribable as shell corporations. Also in London, ninety per cent of the buildings owned by foreign companies are registered as tax havens. As indicated by the Central Anti-Drug-Trafficking Directive and as has emerged from the many investigations coordinated by the Italian judiciary, the most powerful criminal organizations, such as the ‘Ndrangheta, also invest here” (p. 46-47, *Fiumi d'oro*, cit., 2017). On the ‘Ndrangheta’s presence in all key sectors of politics, public administration and the Italian economy, see the *Relazione annuale sulle attività svolte dal Procuratore nazionale e dalla Direzione nazionale antimafia e antiterrorismo nonché sulle dinamiche e strategie della criminalità organizzata di tipo mafioso* (Prot. 12720/2017/PNA; from July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2016).

³¹ Gratteri’s & Nicaso’s last book *Grifone. Come la tecnologia sta cambiando il volto della ‘ndrangheta* (Milano, Mondadori, 2023), focuses on how technologies are changing the face of organized crime (see dark web, untraceable dirty money transitions, cryptocurrencies, AI, Metaverse, and Non-fungible tokens).

³² Di Bella is currently President of the Juvenile Court in Catania (Sicily), with still an active involvement in Calabrian schools. In Catania, Di Bella continues to apply his revolutionary methods while achieving important results, such as the recent collaboration by Mafia Godfather Giovanni Piero Salvo. Sentenced to life, Salvo now admits to the criminal wrong which completely defined his own life, and offered to teach imprisoned Mafia youngsters how to avoid committing his crimes and choose to fully embrace legality instead (see: <https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2024/06/30/news/Catania>; Laura Di Stefano, *A casa del boss del clan Cappello: “Non mi pento ma tolgo carusi alla Mafia. Ai giovani dico: attenti, quel mondo fa schifo”*, «La Sicilia», 11 July 2024, pp. 1-3). As for his Memorandum of Understanding *Free to Choose*, a new law has been successfully promulgated in Calabria (Regional Law 28 June 2023, n. 27), titled “Riconoscimento e sostegno del progetto ‘Giustizia e Umanità Liberi di scegliere”” (Recognition and support of the ‘Justice and Humanity Free to choose’ project). Furthermore, in April 2024 *Free to choose* protocol has been renewed and signed by the Italian Government (three-year duration). The international fame of this magistrate has been very recently consolidated in the Australian TV documentary *Seizing the Italian Mafia’s Most Valuable Asset* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=58mymJRYBHg); and in an article by journalist Clare Longrigg in «The Guardian» (Sat. 22, June 2024), www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/22/these-kids-are-violent-drunk-on-power-can-mafia-children-be-saved-from-a-life-of?CMP.

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