

The 'Godfather' Diversifies

Italy's Mafia Has New Look

By Claire Sterling
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PALERMO, Sicily—Mario Puzo's Godfather came back to his ancestral homeland last week, and the natives hardly knew him.

Thousands flocking to the film's Italian premiere were enthralled with the story as folklore, but they saw little resemblance between the Godfather's "family" and their own Mafia in real life.

Ten years ago the movie-going public here might have accepted uncritically what the Corriere della Sera calls "this implicit attempt to idealize the Mafia and give it tragic and heroic connotations." In those days Sicily's "Honored Society" was still wrapped in romantic mystery, especially for Italians who didn't happen to live in Sicily.

Few questioned the century-old legend of a Mafia that kept the order as a surrogate for a negligent state, and a capo mafioso who was a "man of respect," bound to a code of rustic gallantry, dispensing wisdom far and wide and ruling his clan with a firm but paternal hand. But if there was ever a grain of truth in this legend, all Italy knows there isn't now.

Since 1963 an Italian parliamentary commission to "investigate the phenomenon of the Mafia" has been collecting dossiers and interviewing hundreds of policemen, criminals, politicians and bankers.

It certainly hasn't stamped out the Mafia, which not only continues to bleed western Sicily white but has opened

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PALERMO, From A1

branch offices on the mainland from Calabria to Rome, Milan and Turin.

Nor, say Sicilians in the know here, has it come close to understanding the "new" Mafia that has emerged in the past decade, urbanized, industrialized, incomparably more efficient and deadly than the old feudal kind.

For all its promises of lurid disclosures, the commission has never faced up to the really knotty question: Its 2,000-page report sank into oblivion last spring when it turned out to contain not a single simple declarative sentence explaining just how the Mafia can buy enough protection in Palermo and Rome to get away with systematic murder.

Nevertheless, the commis-

sion did get across to the nation the fact that in the last 25 years the Mafia has murdered at least 2,500 men, women and children in Sicily, many of whose bones still molder in remote mountain caves known as Mafia cemeteries.

It also turned up other absorbing information about the Mafia's business and personnel practices, including unusually educational biographies of Sicily's top 10 Mafia leaders. A visit to some of these capo Mafiosi now living in compulsory (if temporary) retirement on the bleak Mediterranean island of Linosa, shows these Godfathers to be about as paternal as a pit of cobras.

Among those presently in exile on Linosa is Antonio La Barbera of Palermo, one of

the dozen mammasantissimi (literally "the holiest of mothers," in Sicilian parlance the most vicious of Mafia killers) in the group. A dapper gentleman of 48, dressed for the beach in blue linen shorts and immaculate white tennis shoes, Don Antonio did not care to discuss his career: The subject didn't interest him, he said. But it interests his countrymen.

What is fascinating about La Barbera's life story is not so much the itemized list of his known crimes, running to four printed pages—kidnaping, extortion, rape, arson, dynamiting, drug running, common theft, scores of killings on his own or by the 40-odd gunmen in his clan—as the modern methods he introduced.

From the time La Barbera moved into the narcotics trade run by the rival Greco clan, touching off a gang war in Palermo that has raged on and off for 13 years, an "Americanized" Mafia has closed in on the Sicilian capital with stunning precision.

New Pursuits

La Barbera himself hasn't been running the whole show by any means, his activities being confined largely to the international drug traffic, the city's wholesale fruit and vegetable markets, and the building trades.

The rest, divided up none too peacefully among other

Mafia clans, goes far beyond traditional Mafia pursuits such as white slavery, illegal whiskey stills, cattle rustling and control of water supplies in outlying rural areas, drugs and contraband tobacco. Whether by outright ownership or regular collections of protection money, the "honored society" is into everything from fishing and meat-slaughtering to ports, garages, hotels, bars, retail shops, insurance, banking and practically all local industry.

In widening their field, younger Mafia leaders like La Barbera have not only grown richer faster than their elders—several have become multimillionaires almost overnight—but they have also shown themselves to be greedier, more brutally impatient and incautious. Recalcitrant clients and intrusive Mafia rivals are "shot first and reasoned with later," a Sicilian reporter said.

Membership has been opened to trigger-happy riff-raff that an old-timer would have nothing to do with. And in the last couple of years the new Mafia has broken two previously inviolate rules: never to put the bite on a client already paying for protection, and never to lay a finger on a journalist or judge.

Since 1970, the Mafia has kidnaped the sons of four extremely wealthy Sicilians,

at least two of whom had been paying generous protection money for years. Nevertheless, they were obliged to pay ransoms reportedly running to as much as a million dollars. The latest victim—a muscular young engineer called Luciano Cassina, who never moved without a bodyguard and who drove a car equipped with radio-telephone for just such emergencies—was taken at gunpoint in broad daylight last August, on one of Palermo's busiest streets. Having put up a stiff fight, he has not been heard from since.

Furthermore; in these same two years the Mafia kidnaped and certainly murdered (though the body was never found) a popular and nosy Sicilian journalist called Mauro de Mauro. Not long afterward, it machine-gunned the attorney general of Palermo, Pietro Scaglione.

If not for that extraordinarily injudicious last move, men like Antonio La Barbera might still be living it up in expensive nightclubs instead of retiring at nightfall, after checking in with the police, on one-horse islands like Linosa.

Vigorous Crackdown

Not long after Scaglione's death, an informer who reportedly knew a great deal about it was also murdered, and police and carabinieri cracked down on Mafia leaders, with a vigor and venom

unknown since the days of Mussolini's fanatic anti-Mafia crusader, Prefect Mori.

A hundred and ten important Mafiosi and some 700 smaller fry were rounded up in Sicily and on the Italian mainland, including a number suspected of having had a hand in De Mauro's and Scaglione's deaths...

Nearly all had been taken to court time and again on bloodcurdling charges and acquitted for lack of evidence. Evidence is not easily come by when witnesses and judges are openly and flatly warned that they and their families will be killed in the event of a guilty verdict.

The only way to hold these celebrated thugs, through a special anti-Mafia law passed in 1965, was to send them into "confinio," or enforced residence, as far as possible from their place of business.

Until last year's dramatic roundup, most Mafia leaders caught in the police net had ended up in fairly comfortable northern towns, from which they could easily dial Sicily for long, untraceable telephone calls, and even commute on fast superhighways and anonymous Alitalia flights. Wisre and tougher now, the police have insisted on sending this last and most distinguished group to islands like Linosa, with a policeman glued to a chair next to the single public telephone,

a darkly hostile local populace, and, weather permitting, a steamer calling in twice a week.

Bitter Mafiosi

They don't live so badly. They can swim and sunbathe, and pick cactus fruit, and several—La Barbera among them—have brought wives or mistresses and children. But they are bitter all the same.

"Why don't they send us to jail? At least we could see television," one complained.

And they are understandably nervous. What bothers them is not so much the law: Though nearly all will coming up in yet another mass trial of 114 "new mafiosi" in Palermo soon, practically all such trials in the past have ended in massive acquittals. The worrisome thing is who may grab their power and incomes during the three or four years of their absence.

"In a way, the crackdown has simply made matters worse," a Sicilian editor said. "Nobody expects the Mafia to go out of business, even if practically every one of its leaders is in exile now. It's happened before, and the mafiosi usually just lie low till it blows over. The odd thing is that they aren't lying low this time. Whoever it is running things, they seem to get more arrogant by the minute—and while the police used to know pretty much who was up to

what, they don't any more. The whole map of the Mafia has changed. It might be years before we can fill in the new one."

Some authorities go further.

"What we're faced with these days is still more squalid and brutalized delinquency than before, if that's conceivable," a police officer said. "This new crowd coming up will stop at nothing to grab power, and they're desperate for money. It takes a big cash outlay to keep the drug traffic and tobacco contraband going, and business hasn't been so good lately with top men away. In fact, we hear that your own Cosa Nostra boys are sending relief checks.

"Furthermore, the Mafia needs a lot of money for extras nowadays. All those *capomafiosi* in exile have three or four expensive lawyers. Their legal bills alone are running to several million dollars. Then their families have to be supported, and witnesses have to be paid off, and all the other usual palms have to be kept greased. No wonder they kidnaped Cassina. Considering how hard up they must be, that was probably only the beginning."

Off screen, then, the Godfather could hardly be said to cut a heroic figure in Sicily. He is not wise, compassionate, generous, nor just. He is merely a cheap racketeer and a killer.