

Sample translation from

Mafiopoli by Sanne de Boer

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In Calabria on Christmas Day of the year 2006, a young woman named Maria was hit in her chest by two bullets. She was helping her mother-in-law in the kitchen when uninvited guests entered the house with a Kalashnikov, a hunting rifle and handguns. Although the party was showered with forty bullets, Maria's was the only death. Her children and in-laws survived, as did her husband, the intended target of the attack. In the Calabrian village of San Luca, he was known as the leader of an 'Ndrangheta clan.

When I arrived in Calabria four days later, I heard nothing of this family tragedy. I had left Amsterdam to live and work on a beautiful hill on the outskirts of a coastal village for a few months. Oblivious of the 'Ndrangheta, I abandoned myself to the intense scent of oranges I picked, the warmth of my wood stove and the views of green mountains and an azure sea.

Maria Strangio's death wasn't picked up by the media, but it foreshadowed the moment that the 'Ndrangheta was suddenly thrust into the international spotlight. Until then, the international press hadn't paid much attention to the crimes of the Calabrian Mafia or the strange spelling of its name. Even important Italian newspapers ignored the 'Ndrangheta, which was still more or less dismissed as a local bunch of backward hotheads. And yet, by this time the 'Ndrangheta had already become the most powerful Mafia in Italy and the most pervasive in the world.

Because of films such as *The Godfather*, that other, 'classic' Italian Mafia, the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, had long since become world famous. However, not everyone was aware of what had really happened in Sicily during the years that the captivating chronicles of the Corleone family were staged. As the scene was set for the film hero to die a natural death in the garden of a picturesque villa, the real mafiosi from the village of Corleone were shooting down one enemy after another. It didn't matter whether they were other mafiosi or journalists, judges or policemen. Toto Riina, the actual leader of the Corleonesi Mafia clan, was responsible for the death of hundreds of people, some of whom he strangled with his own hands. Other than his native village, Toto Riina had very little in common with the far more elegant fictional godfather Don Vito Corleone, apart from heavy jowls perhaps. Heavy jowls and friends in high places.

In 1992, two years after the release of the final part of *The Godfather* trilogy, these friends in high places disappointed Toto Riina, causing the Sicilian Mafia to display the extreme cruelty it was capable of. Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, two exceptionally courageous investigating

judges, were both assassinated in bomb attacks. Falcone was on his way from the airport to Palermo when hundreds of kilogrammes of explosives were detonated in a tunnel beneath the motorway. The tarmac was torn apart, leaving a huge crater and hurling the cars, along with Falcone, his wife and three of his bodyguards, into the air. Two months later, Paolo Borsellino had just rung his mother's doorbell when he was killed along with five of his bodyguards by a massive car bomb. The street looked like it had been struck by an earthquake. While Cosa Nostra violence was making headlines worldwide, the 'Ndrangheta, not yet made famous by films or bombings, was quietly building its empire.

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It was during my first summer in Calabria when news spread around the world that the 'Ndrangheta had committed a bloodbath in Germany. Six young men had been showered with bullets in front of a popular Italian restaurant in Duisburg. The media linked this carnage to a feud between 'Ndrangheta families from the Calabrian village of San Luca. I had only heard the term 'Ndrangheta a few times and knew nothing beyond that it was the name of the Calabrian Mafia. When I asked my neighbours, they said: 'No, there is no Mafia in our village. The Mafia is farther south.' I saw that San Luca, the village where both the suspects and victims of the Duisburg massacre came from, was a two-hour drive southward along the coast. Why, I wondered, had they carried out this massacre 2000 kilometres to the north, in a city that was a two-hour drive from Amsterdam?

To my fellow villagers, the blood feud appeared totally irrelevant. Judging from their indifference, San Luca seemed almost as distant as Duisburg. I was curious to know more but I needed to be patient, as my Italian wasn't yet good enough to read the local newspapers or have probing conversations. Not that I was overly concerned, as none of the people I knew struck me as mafiosi. They lived simple, unobtrusive lives.

[...]

Time went by and I'd been in Calabria for nine months when one warm September night, something alarming happened. The whole street was woken with a start: a car had been set alight. People came out in their night clothes to help extinguish the fire and comfort one another. The burned-out car belonged to a young woman working for the municipality. She looked shaken but remained very quiet. No one called the police or the fire brigade.

At her kitchen table the next day, she told me that she had a good idea who had set her car on fire. She made a point of applying the rules fairly to all building applications but this was evidently unacceptable to certain villagers. Demanding liberties, the arson was how they made clear that they would do as they pleased even if their requests were not granted. I asked my neighbour whether she would report the incident to the police. She wouldn't, she said, convinced that it would only make things worse. Instead, she would start looking for another job because she didn't want to stay at the municipality knowing she would have to comply. She didn't name the

suspected perpetrators. I didn't press her but I lent her my car, hoping to help in some way.

By that time, more than a hundred German and Italian detectives were trying to solve the murder case in Duisburg. Fifteen years had passed since the Italian police had first warned their German colleagues that the restaurant – no simple pizzeria; rather somewhere you could eat lobster – was being run by a Calabrian Mafia clan. In the aftermath of the sixfold murder, plenty of evidence was found to support this claim. For example, a scorched prayer card depicting archangel Michael, a patron saint of the 'Ndrangheta, was found in the pocket of one of the victims, Tommaso. The boy, who attended a local culinary school, had been doing an internship at the restaurant. On the night of the assault, he had turned eighteen, and all indications were that his boss, the chef Sebastiano, had seized the opportunity to initiate him into the clan after closing time.

Tommaso had dribbled blood from his finger onto the card, then set it alight, following the rules of the initiation ritual. But he hadn't completely burned the prayer card, only the angel's face. The angel was still clearly visible, poised with his sword over a creature, half-human and half-dragon, lying face-down on smouldering rocks. Archangel Michael's large white wings and long red cape were still visible, contrasting with the backdrop of a light blue sky and rolling green hills.

Perhaps Tommaso had wanted a keepsake of the evening and had slipped the prayer card, once it had cooled, into his wallet, which he had put in his back pocket. At approximately two o'clock in the morning he had walked out of the restaurant with 39-year-old Sebastiano, his sixteen-year-old nephew, and three men in their twenties: two other Calabrian waiters and Marco, who had just arrived from Calabria. The police found all six of them shortly thereafter in a black Volkswagen Golf and a white van, riddled by a hail of bullets. Tommaso had fourteen bullet wounds, four of them to his head.

It had been a German woman who had called the emergency services. She had passed two men on the street heading towards the restaurant parking lot. Moments later she heard what sounded like fireworks and when she walked back, she saw the same two men disappearing down an alleyway. Detectives used her testimony and security camera images to begin their search for the two murderers. They knew almost immediately that the Strangio-Nirta 'Ndrangheta clan was involved. They were in a ferocious conflict with the Pelle-Vottari clan, who ran the Da Bruno restaurant. For sixteen years, the feud had been fought solely in and around San Luca. There, in Calabria, the clans had been intermittently attacking each other

with guns and Kalashnikovs since a commotion one evening during carnival had escalated into a first fatal shooting.

Despite his surname, Da Bruno's owner and chef, Sebastiano Strangio, confusingly didn't belong to the Nirta-Strangio clan, but to their rivals. He might have been unarmed when leaving the restaurant with his boys that night, but he had certainly been preparing for a new chapter in the vendetta. Police found an automatic rifle loaded with ninety rounds in a storage room at the restaurant, along with an impressive hoard of other ammunition. Who would have expected to find something that sinister behind the busy restaurant's smart façade in the Silberpalais, Duisburg's largest office building and according to the website, 'an ideal place for national and international companies to do business'?

As it turned out, Da Bruno wasn't only an arms depot for the Pelle-Vottari clan, it was also their regular meeting place. The police discovered a special room without windows, hidden behind a camouflaged sliding door. A room that presumably not all the restaurant's waiters and certainly not all its guests knew about. In this secret room the detectives found a figurine of archangel Michael and a solid wooden table with twelve stately chairs, the one at the head of the table with the highest back. A typical setting for 'Ndrangheta rituals, like Tommaso's initiation.

Rituals and symbolism were also important to the Nirta-Strangio clan's two gunmen. They probably didn't know that it was Tommaso's birthday that night, let alone that he was being initiated, but they had chosen the date of their vengeance carefully. It was the night of 14 to 15 August 2007, and sunrise heralded the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, a summer holiday as important as Christmas to Italian families' sense of togetherness. The assassins wanted to tarnish the holiday for the Pelle-Vottari clan forever with the memory of the massacre and the loss of their boys. Just as Christmas would never be the same for their clan due to of the murder of Maria Strangio, who had been hit by the bullets intended for her husband, their leader, on that fateful Christmas Day in San Luca. Did they believe that Maria's soul could finally enter heaven, now that her death had been avenged with six new souls?