

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.

