

Italian and American Officials Illuminate Current Antimafia Activities

Susannah Gold (October 21, 2009)



Italian and American law enforcement officials, activists and lawyers brought home the reality of antimafia activities in Italy and in America at a recent conference at John Jay College in Manhattan. The occasion, celebrating the life of Joe Petrosino - an Italian emigrant and NYPD lieutenant - and the dedication of a park to him, was a reminder of how much has been done and how much still remains in the ongoing war against the Mafia.

Last week's conference held at John Jay College in Manhattan was dedicated to the life of Joe Petrosino, a New York City police detective who apparently thwarted an assassination attempt on the life of President McKinley earlier in the century and was murdered by the Mafia in Palermo. Some



200,000 showed up for his funeral in 1909. According to a New York Times piece last week, the diminutive Italian emigrant was a force of nature. I went to the conference because I wanted to hear the Judge and Super Attorney General against the Mafia, Piero Grasso. I had followed his career and those of his predecessors over the past years.

In fact, I learned Italian in 1991 reading about the Mafia. It was the summer when Libero Grassi was murdered. Grassi was an Italian clothing manufacturer from Palermo who was killed by the Mafia after he refused to pay their demands, or the "pizzo." He wrote an open letter to the Sicilian newspaper in which he denounced the request for payment in order to keep his shop open. He was gunned down within the year. I remember so clearly that August when he was murdered. I had been in Italy for three months. My Italian wasn't very good and I became obsessed with reading the newspaper and trying to keep all the names straight and the different mafias throughout Italy. It was also the first time that I had heard the names of Antimafia Judge Giovanni Falcone and his fellow Antimafia Magistrate Paolo Borsellino. These two men seemed like super heroes to me in those early years 1991-1992 of my Italian journey. I think of them every year on the anniversaries of their deaths, in May and in July. The year that they were killed, 1992, was shocking for the violence that ensued and for the audaciousness of both assassinations. When Falcone, his wife and his bodyguards were murdered, the Mafia blew up a huge part of the highway. I remember reading the paper that day and just staring at the photos in disbelief. The sheer scope of the gesture was beyond words. Less than two months later, Borsellino was murdered as he went to visit his mother. All seemed lost. These two men who had dedicated their lives to fighting the mafia were simply brutally murdered in broad daylight.

The next year, 1993, I was living in Florence when the bomb went off in Via dei Georgofili. An entire family was exterminated in that Mafia related bombing. I lived pretty close to the site of the bombing. We had friends over and all of a sudden all the lights in Florence went out and sirens started wailing. It was very scary as truck after truck of carabinieri came roaring into the center of the city and people were carried out bleeding from glass that had shattered and the building that had collapsed. Part of central Florence was closed off for years. We ran to see what had happened but never imagined the scope of the damage. I remember feeling sick to my stomach and being scared.

That same summer came further attacks in Rome and Milan, in Via Palestro where more people lost their lives in a war against a new law that had isolated Mafiosi in jail. All the years I lived in Milan, I would walk on Via Palestro everyday to get to work and reflect on that bombing. It was all very palpable at the time. You couldn't get away from news of Mafia bombings and everywhere seemed unsafe. Years later in New York post 9/11, many of those feelings returned. It was all very disturbing about what it said about the ability to stop violence.

Listening to Piero Grasso and Don Luigi Ciotti brought back a flood of memories from those days and endless admiration for these men who dedicate their lives to fighting to bring men to justice and to help those left behind by such carnage. Libera, the association that Ciotti founded in the wake of the deaths of Falcone and Borsellino, does amazing work with schools and universities. On their website, there is a long endless list of people who have been victims of the Mafie (plural because there is more than one). It is actually staggering to read through the list and reflect on all of these lives that have been wiped out. His group, along with others, is working to pass a law that the property that is confiscated from the mafia is returned to the community to help the local economy. Apparently, even the G8 voted on this law.

It is easy to feel faraway from these types of events if you don't work in these fields or live in an area that is under siege but reading books such as Gomorra by Roberto Saviano about the Camorra in Campania or the film made from the book bring it all back. A film that I saw many years ago and that Ciotti mentions in an interview with I-Italy should not be missed. It is another one of those movies that leaves you shell shocked. It is called I Cento Passi and is the story of a young Sicilian man who comes from a Mafioso family but tries to go another way, Peppino Impastato, was his name.



I'm not sure where that kind of courage comes from and why some people have it and some don't but I do think that we all have a responsibility to know what goes on and not pretend otherwise, even in small ways. I used to have the same feeling reading the names of all the people who died in the Twin Towers in that special section of the New York Times, A Nation Challenged. I would read through those stories one by one as if in some way paying homage to those who died.

By joining an association, reading these books or watching films about the lives of people who are dedicated to fighting illegality, we too can strike out for civil society and can be a support to those who are on the front lines, whether in the streets, in courts or in schools. Be it a 5'3 Italian named Joseph Petrosino 100 years ago or some of our modern day heroes, these men and women should be celebrated, supported and applauded.

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