

Route 106
Italy's 'Ndrangheta Highway

Sixty-Five Miles of Blood, Death, and Organized Crime

by Antonio Talia

UNCORRECTED PROOFS

PROLOGUE

The sky-blue and red light filters through the church's stained glass windows, illuminating the face of a bald man, with deep-set wrinkles and a bushy handlebar mustache.

These seem like the features of a Frankish king, one you might find carved in the bas-reliefs of a Gothic cathedral but you can never remember exactly which dynasty, an impression that would however be misleading, because France is twelve hundred miles away: in actual fact, this church is in the ghost town of Pentedattilo, on the Ionian coast in the province of Reggio Calabria, and the bald man is named Claudio Rodà.

Claudio Rodà spent more than thirty years of his life working

underground, in French mines. Then he spent several years in retirement on the Côte d'Azur—and so he tells me with his buttery French “r,” in an Italian dotted with the occasional Gallic hesitations—but that life bored him; so he and his wife decided to return home to Calabria, air out an old house sitting empty on the seashore, and while away their golden years in a town they'd long ago abandoned, when they were both still teenagers.

For three years, Signor Rodà has been taking care of Pentedattilo's church: he sandpapers wooden pews, nails windows back together, and restores stained glass windows in a church full of the deceased, more than the living, a church in which no more than ten weddings are held in an average year, a church at the center of a village that has been left for dead for forty years now.

But really—he continues with his story—not all the residents of the township genuinely rest in peace. One time, for instance, he caught some pilfering church thieves red-handed, and to judge from the faint smile that rustles his thick mustache and the quick-handed gesture that follows, he probably did much more than just chasing them off with a few empty shouts. Signor Claudio's hands are exactly the kind of hands you wouldn't want to encounter if you're caught breaking and entering in a church. Obviously, of course, in the area around Pentedattilo, there are characters

much worse than petty church thieves.

In the chapel of Peter and Paul rest the mortal remains of several members of the Alberti family, perhaps the first documented victims of the *syndrome* that lurks in this part of the world. Everyone who lives here knows the story, though with various differing flourishes: on the night of April 16, 1686, Baron Bernardino Abenavoli and his armed followers burst into the Alberti family castle, just two narrow streets over from the church where we are currently sitting. Marchese Lorenzo Alberti had recently married Caterina Cortéz, the daughter of the councilor to the Viceroy of Naples, and the marchese had furthermore promised his sister Antonietta's hand in marriage to his brother-in-law Don Petrillo Cortéz, a double matrimonial maneuver that would surely pave the way for his quick rise through the ranks of the local petty nobility and open the doors of the capital city, Naples, to him and his family. There also existed, however, a prior understanding that entailed Antonietta's hand in marriage and her earthly flesh, contracted with a view to resolving old and long-simmering tensions over boundaries and grazing rights between the Alberti clan and Baron Bernardino. When the baron discovered that he'd been shoved aside in favor of a higher-ranking Spaniard, he planned and unleashed a nighttime raid, slaughtering sixteen people—among them, of

course, Lorenzo Alberti, who was stabbed repeatedly and then finished off with musket fire—and abducting both Antonietta and Petrillo, since the latter as a Spanish lordling could always come in handy as a hostage. This, at least, is the better known version. But as we shall see, in these lands the versions so often proliferate and diverge in branching paths, accounts grow muddled and confused. The documents of the era report differing histories; some maintain that there had been a secret understanding between Bernardino and Antonietta, and that the baron had no intention of killing his rivals but had simply eloped with the girl, leaving his henchmen behind in Pentedattilo. They alone, therefore, were responsible for the massacre. Whatever the case, Antonietta and Bernardino were married three days later, after the Viceroy had received news of the slaughter and was already sending a contingent of soldiers to lay siege to Montebello; the Viceroy later packed Antonietta off to a nunnery in Reggio Calabria and—just to drive home the point—displayed the heads of the six men who took part in the massacre on spikes on the walls of the castle of Pentedattilo. Bernardino's life was spared, and several years later he enlisted under a false identity as a captain in the Austrian army, only to catch a Turkish cannon ball in the chest during a military expedition in support of the Venetians.

Above and beyond his duties of care for the tomb of Marchese Alberti and his sideline in scaring off church thieves, Claudio Rodà is the custodian of other memories. Since the day he became the unofficial caretaker of the church, people have been entrusting him with vintage photographs which he frames and indexes on the upper floor of the sacristy.

He shows me the walls of the rooms where he has hung black-and-white pictures of family groups and faces long out of fashion—gaunt, hollow cheekbones, eyes far too large—set between long and painstakingly engrossed family trees of people long vanished, scattered across the globe decades since. Signor Claudio catalogues them with the same gracious care he devotes to the altar and the tombs, and when anyone comes in search of information, he does his best to provide them with answers: what ever became of Aunt Domenica? She became Dominique, and married a certain Steven Holz somewhere in Germany in 1962. Francesco Marrari became Frank, and he was buried in a New Jersey graveyard at the ripe old age of eighty. Some family trees, however, seem to have contracted the local syndrome, and were lopped off unceremoniously, root and branch.

To overlay those family trees on a map of State Highway 106

means gaining access to a secret geography made up of hidden connections, ties of kinship, recurring surnames and baptismal names that flow through subterranean channels only to reappear two or three generations later on the other side of the planet.

One need only step out onto the sacristy balconies, which overlook a stretch of State Highway 106, wedged between the hills and the coastline. To the north, toward the hills and with the sea at your back, you can just glimpse Montebello: it was here, in 1968, three centuries after Baron Abenavoli, that Giuseppe Pensabene was born, a soldier in the Imerti family who made his bones in 1985 in the Second 'Ndrangheta War, emigrating to Brianza in northern Italy at the end of the Eighties and then, in 2010—in the aftermath of the “Crimine-Infinito” operation—rose to the leadership of one of the most important families in Northern Italy, winning the moniker of “the Pope.” He was arrested in 2014, implicated by evidence found of money-laundering operations involving millions of euros, stretching all the way to Hong Kong, by way of Dubai.

If instead I face east from the sacristy balcony, I can see Bova Marina, where Antonino Vadalà was born: he was extradited to Italy by the Slovak authorities in May of 2018, on charges of cocaine trafficking. A few months earlier, Vadalà had been arrested but then released in the

murder of Martina Kušnírová and her fiancé Ján Kuciak, an investigative journalist who was working on fraud cases involving European Union financing. That double murder led to the fall of the Bratislava government.

If I leave the sacristy of Pentedattilo and climb the mountains in search of a broader view, and I continue to turn my gaze east, I can just make out the skyline of San Luca—the home town of both the victims and the murderers of the massacre of Duisburg, in Germany—where on the night of August 15, 2007, five soldiers of the Pelle-Vottari clan were slaughtered.

Still further north lies Oppido Mamertina, the birthplace of Francesco “Frank” Madafferi, who, again in 2007, in the harbor of Melbourne, Australia, tried to complete the biggest known shipment of ecstasy in history; while if I drive another fifty miles northeast I find myself in Siderno, the home town of the Commisso family, which imported and distributed heroin in Vancouver, ran a wide-ranging protection racket in Ontario, and took contracts for murders ranging from all of Canada to the United States.

And so it goes, from one small town to the next, the syndrome manifesting itself in increasingly complex stratifications that then spread

out in a network that takes in all four cardinal points of the compass. State Highway 106 isn't just a two-lane blacktop running along the coast, it's a statistical abomination of international scope and scale: I feel reasonably safe in stating that there is no place else on earth that can boast such a density of criminal phenomena, nothing that comes even remotely close to what you'll find along the 104 kilometers—the 65 miles—between Reggio Calabria and Siderno. The syndrome must necessarily be the byproduct of a unique combination of elements and conditions that metastasized here, and nowhere else.

Claudio Rodà bids me farewell and goes back to genealogical studies.

Traveling all 104 kilometers of that road strikes me as the only way to decipher this enigma.

—English translation by Antony

Shugaar