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Literary Festival in Italy Gives Residents Voice in Fight Against Mafia

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Published: July 21, 2012

Mob-related crimes continue in Lamezia Terme, blood still occasionally spills on the town's dusty streets and investigators periodically catch up with residents accused of colluding with gangsters. But the organizers of "[Trame](#)" ("Plots" in English), a festival of books about the Mafia, crow victory when they gaze on the town's squares packed with residents who have come to listen to authors — often journalists, prosecutors or other anticrime operators — talk about their books.

On a warm night in late June, residents jostled to occupy plastic chairs set up in a central square. Others strolled along the main street, leafing through books and browsing amid the anti-Mafia paraphernalia.

"Fighting the Mafia can take different guises. Even talking about it makes you stronger," said Tano Grasso, who started the festival last year when he was the councilman for culture here. (Mr. Grasso founded Italy's first antiracket association in 1991 and has lived under police protection ever since.)

The 'Ndrangheta has long extended its tentacles into the social fabric of this city, flexing its control over public works and manifold private dealings and social transactions. That is why it will never be defeated solely by prosecutors or law enforcement officers, but must be uprooted from Calabria's culture, said the festival director, Lirio Abbate, a journalist who has moved with his own armed escorts since the 2006 publication of a book about political collusion with crime syndicates in Italy.

"Calabria today is Palermo 30 years ago, where you couldn't say the word Mafia out loud," Mr. Abbate said, referring to the Sicilian city. "That's why we came here, to bring magistrates, journalists, authors and try and break the wall of omertà," the code of silence that has frustrated law enforcement in clan-dominated regions.

The book festival also capitalizes on what one publisher called a “literary boom” in Italy of books about the Mafia and its regional counterparts: the Neapolitan Camorra, Sacra Corona Unita in Puglia, and the local ’Ndrangheta variety.

“It’s a market phenomenon, a fad,” said Florindo Rubbettino, an editor who dated the growing interest in mob literature to Roberto Saviano’s best-selling 2006 book, [“Gomorrah.”](#) His family’s company has been publishing books about the ’Ndrangheta since the 1980s, a sign of civic commitment, perhaps, but also a challenge in a region where the entrepreneurial spirit is constantly taxed by “criminal conditioning” and administrative hurdles, he said.

The festival could have been held in any major city in Calabria, a region of two million that produces only 2.2 percent of Italy’s gross domestic product, where youth unemployment reaches peaks of 39 percent in some cities and organized crime offers an alternative to joblessness.

In the context of the economic crisis, the ’Ndrangheta is the “only business that has money,” and providing jobs creates social consensus, Mr. Abbate said. “We want to show that there are alternatives.”

That is true of Calabria in general, where there is a “diffuse Mafia mentality,” said Manuela Iatì, a journalist for Sky TG24 television who was born and raised in Calabria and has written about the ’Ndrangheta. “It doesn’t mean that people are Mafiosi but that they’ve accepted the way of favors and indebtedness to others, because the state and the services it should offer don’t function.”

“Corruption is Italian,” she said. “But here it is shored up by organized crime.”

But Lamezia Terme is emblematic in its own way. Two town councils have been dissolved in the past 20 years, on suspicion that they had been infiltrated by the ’Ndrangheta.

“There actually aren’t that many Mafiosi,” said a local priest, the Rev. Giacomo Panizza, who has been a frequent target of clan violence because of his outspokenness. “Their power derives from the fact that people cooperate and allow them to maneuver.”

In the past six months there have been three attacks against homes where Father Panizza runs projects that assist disabled people, immigrants and recovering drug addicts. “It’s because we have consensus, but they want to show they are in control,” he said.

The mayor, Gianni Speranza, has put the steady hemorrhaging of Lamezia Terme’s youth at the top of his agenda, even if he cannot offer them work.

Looking at a group of young men and women sitting rapt during the presentation of “Mafia Brotherhoods: Camorra, Mafia, ’Ndrangheta: The Rise of the Honored Societies” by John Dickie, a professor of Italian studies at University College London, Mr. Speranza sighed.

“If the young kids here tonight remained in Calabria for university and then found work, Calabria would change from this to this,” he said, flipping his hand over, palm to back. “Instead they leave because there’s nothing for them here.”

“Trame is a signal of commitment toward change,” said Mr. Speranza, whose name means “hope.” It is also an attempt to build social cohesion, he said. (Indeed, events scheduled on the final night of the festival were postponed because of the Italy-England quarterfinal match in the European soccer championship, shown on a large screen used the night before to show a documentary on the killings of Mafia-busting prosecutors and lawmakers by the mob — notably the top anti-Mafia prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, who were murdered 20 years ago this year).

“You get a sense that there is hunger for the rule of law here,” Mr. Dickie said.

In the 1980s, Italy “looked like it was going the way of Mexico today,” he said, but it has managed to carry out important measures to fight crime. That said, he added, the continued presence of crime gangs indicates that on a deeper level, “repression can also be just gardening unless there is a will to change among the population.”