

CALABRIA/1

Tales of ordinary violence

By Roberta Mani

«I am the victim of persecution. They've been threatening me for the last three years. Only because I do my job as a photo reporter. Only because I documented their arrests». Mario Tosti is a well-known photographer working for the *Quotidiano della Calabria* and today, as usual, he is running to take pictures of the daily news. He is always in the field. He loves his job and he does not want to give up on it. But he does not feel safe. He was targeted by a family of criminals in Cosenza. Hounded, shadowed, insulted. Every time he goes to Cosenza for work, he is attacked. He has reported it to the police, but the problem has not been resolved. They say that it takes time, that "justice must run its course". In the meanwhile, he has received spits, threats, verbal and physical assaults by the same group of criminals who do not quit. «Six months ago» – he says – «I dodged a stab and on 7 July 2011 I was hospitalized for twenty days. Head trauma, bruises, kicks, punches, slaps. They attacked me under the eyes of the police. They feel so invincible and untouchable that they don't care about the police».

Mario has taken pictures of all their arrests. Mario was there when, in October 2008, one of them was arrested for stabbing his own nephew. Mario was there for the newspaper. He was always ahead of the news. They promised revenge. Threats keep on coming. The last one was in October 2011, when the investigation of his attack was dismissed: «Spits and swears, again. They told me: "we'll cut your head off, you'll not end well". But I won't stop. My job is my life», he explains. His photos are published every day on the *Quotidiano*. Mario does not feel safe but he is waiting for justice to run its course.

The Soriano clan against the "Quotidiano della Calabria"

«The bad thing about working in this region is the climate», says the editor in chief of the *Quotidiano della Calabria* Matteo Cosenza. His photographer was beaten up, a few reporters were intimidated and on 20 July 2011 two Molotov cocktails were found near the newspaper's central office in Castrolibero, near Cosenza. A plastic bag was left on a little wall at the entrance. Inside, there were two Molotov cocktails with the fuse primed. A worrying message, which is still not entirely clear.

«Dear Mr Lopreiato, I am the "Mafioso" Leone Soriano, born in Vibo Valentia on 21 November 1966 and currently a prisoner at the prison of Cosenza. I am writing because you're not a serious journalist, you're a fool».

The intimidating message was sent to the *Gazzetta del Sud*'s office in Vibo Valentia, on 19 May 2011. The addressee is Nicola Lopreiato, department head of the newspaper. Leone Soriano is the head of the Filandari family, the enemy clan of the powerful Mancusos. Soriano writes from prison and says: «... I invite you to publish this letter (...) and you can report me for calling you a fool, but I couldn't find any other nicknames, I leave you to your stupidity, you can have the judges order my shooting».

«I often wrote about the legal issues of the Sorianos» – Lopreiato says – «and over the last three years I have received three or four letters ordering me not to write anything more and to be careful with what I write. They are offensive to me and to

investigators, like the police force and the judicial authorities. That is delegitimisation. Soriano's last letter mentioned Angela Napoli, parliament member of the Future and Freedom party, a person who is really committed to fighting the mafia. Soriano wrote that in 1994 she had asked votes to fugitives. He sent a letter to her, too. Obviously all this was reported to the police».

Investigators considered it a serious threat and on 25 November 2011 arrested ten members of the Soriano clan and took heavy measures against Leone Soriano. The Sorianos are a dangerous and powerful criminal family. In four years they were responsible for 50 fires and 100 assaults. Their criminal activity is called the "Spider Operation". The criminal spider web consists in a large control of the territories, based on a strategy of terror. The targets are not only businessmen and entrepreneurs, but also policemen and journalists, like Nicola Lopreiato and Pietro Comito, who received a warning call after writing some articles about the new generations of the Soriano clan of Vibo Valentia. «We'll shoot you and bury you in Jonadi», they warned him on 4 July 2010. The grave is ready and the cemetery chosen.

Pietro Comito and Riccardo Giacoia are targets

The Sorianos are not the only ones interested in Pietro Comito's articles. At the end of April 2011, Comito received a threatening letter at the newspaper's office in Catanzaro, where he had just started to work: «Dear bastard, the next time you write something about this city we'll hang you in Piazza San Leoluca and we'll let you dangle there. So that all the cops like you will see you». Piazza San Leoluca is the main square of Vibo Valentia. A few days earlier Comito had written about a possible mafia infiltration in some municipalities in the province of Vibo Valentia.

«I wrote a paradigmatic story. I didn't tell any name or place, I didn't quote official documents, although I had the possibility to. I only wrote a story about an anonymous city councillor for public works that one day hires a driver to work at his hotel. The driver is a 'ndrangheta boss. Since he is a previous offender he doesn't have a driver's licence. So the councillor becomes the driver's driver». The first warning was sent to Comito from a lawyer. The second one, from the councillor himself who, inexplicably, acknowledged himself as the protagonist of Comito's tale. Finally, Comito received a letter threatening death.

In Cosenza, on 16 April 2011 the target was Riccardo Giacoia, 48 years old, a RAI journalist, former correspondent for the Calabria regional TV news and who lives now in Rome working for the national news on RAI 1 channel. He received a yellow envelope at his office. It contained a perfectly preserved 9x21-bore bullet and a white sheet of paper with a black cross on it. No stamp, which means that the letter was delivered by hand.

Giacoia has written a lot about the 'ndrangheta. He covered all the assaults, murders, bloodsheds, but he also deepened the relationship between politics and organised crime, he reported the names of the families involved, without hesitation. And he became a target. The bullet came after he wrote some articles about the "Affruntata", the Easter procession that in Calabria is often an occasion for the new generations of criminals to debut. Last year, there was a fight between the Bonavota clan and the prefecture. It is called the "Sant'Onofrio controversy": the Prefect openly challenged the mafia bosses by saying that the holy statues would have been carried by police agents, if the pressure from the mafia did not cease. In fact, the procession of the Affruntata is an occasion for 'ndrangheta families to reaffirm their power, to restore

the general agreement while their members carry the statues on their shoulders, revered by the whole community.

It is not the first time for Giacoia. He had already been threatened on 16 July 2010 with a threatening letter and dozens of text messages sent to his mobile phone. His name was in the long list of intimidated journalists in Calabria in 2010. A list composed of 20 journalists, it was a record, and brought attention to the Calabria affair.

It's raining threats and violent messages in Calabria, damaging the professional, personal and family lives of many journalists. For many of them, it has happened more than once. And sometimes the invitation to silence comes from a city council or from the governor of the region.

The City Council of Reggio Calabria and the Region of Calabria against the local and national press

The climate is hot on 21 October 2011 during the City Council session of Reggio Calabria. The members must vote on a financial measure to recover a 170 million euro loss. The session starts two hours late. The tension can be felt, the situation is delicate. So journalists and cameramen are roughly thrown out of the hall, a few minutes after the session starts. Enough filming, no more photos. A cameramen of TeleReggio and the reporter of the *Corriere di Calabria* Sergio Conti try to protest. They are asked by the municipal police to identify themselves, and their identity cards are photocopied.

The Public Prosecutor's office and the Ministry of Finance were investigating the Municipal balance sheet. An investigation that dealt also with Orsola Fallara's suicide, since she was the head of the Department of Finance and Taxes of the City Council. It also involved Giuseppe Scopelitti, current Governor of Calabria.

Giuseppe Scopelitti is the one who, on 16 November 2011, harshly insulted three journalists: Guido Ruotolo of *La Stampa*, Enrico Fierro of *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and Roberto Galullo of *Il Sole 24 Ore*. These three reporters cover the news in Calabria and had inevitably written about the financial scandal of the City Council of Reggio. Scopelitti did not refer to their articles or about the inquiries. He only states that «those reporters are fools who think to build their own fortunes on other people's disgraces» and that «they are corrupted».

Living in a tense climate, only few cases end well

2010 was a tough year for journalists in Calabria. Twenty cases in a few months. In 2011, far fewer episodes were reported: only seven. But this does not mean that the risk has ceased. On the contrary, sometimes the silence is even more worrying. Fewer episodes, but the same tension for those journalists who work in troubled areas, where every word is weighed and commented and a single word can cause retaliation.

On 27 December 2009, in Vibo Valentia, a car was set on fire few days before New Year's Eve, representing the first of a long series of threats in 2010. The car belonged to reporter Francesco Mobilio's girlfriend. The investigators never found the people responsible. It often happens. The perpetrators' impunity leaves a constant fear that it could happen again.

The burnt car, the smell, the flames. Antonino Monteleone, a young blogger and now journalist at La7 TV channel, also went through that, on the night between 4 and 5

February 2010. He caught a glimpse of the perpetrators and described them in his police report. They were as young as him, 25 years old, members of the Serraino family. Monteleone had mentioned them in an article about money laundering in the city centre of Reggio Calabria. On 30 September 2010, thanks to the police operation “Epilogue”, they were identified and imprisoned. The wiretappings gave evidence of their revenge plan against the journalist. They said: «He’s a son of a bitch, do you know how many bad things he wrote about the *mafiosi*, about their wives...? He called me “jester rat” in an article about me greeting my neighbour when he was arrested». The investigators caught them. For the first time in Calabria, someone has been put on trial for intimidating a journalist. Antonino Monteleone chose to bring a civil action in the criminal proceedings. A clear and firm choice. Agostino Pantano, ex-reporter of *Calabria Ora* made the same choice. On 1 June 2011, the Court of Palmi accepted his request to bring a civil action in the criminal proceedings against a civil servant who, in 2009 – when the City Council was dissolved for mafia infiltration – insulted him in the course of an anonymous call. Agostino Pantano says: «Episodes like these must not be understated. Over the last a few years, they have become very frequent, especially in Calabria. It is useful that Ossigeno per l’Informazione reports these episodes and points out the risk of underestimating threats and intimidation against journalists. These threats have a national importance».

«Mind your own fucking business, if you don’t wanna die»

For the time being, there are no more episodes with a happy ending. In the other cases, the only hope is that justice can run its course. In Calabria, there are still so many journalists who are afraid to write their articles, who constantly watch their backs, who open envelopes hoping not to find bullets, crosses on their names or on pictures of their families. But there are still many journalists who continue writing in spite of the threats.

«Mind your own fucking business, if you don’t wanna die». This “advice” was given to Saverio Puccio on 22 July 2010, at the office of the *Quotidiano della Calabria* in Catanzaro. He had just written about the dissolution of the City Council of Borgia, reporting the reasons of the Ministry of the Interior. Puccio had written that the vice-mayor was there thanks to his relationship with ‘*ndrangheta* bosses, who conditioned the elections. He had written things that were already written in the trial documents. So, what had been his fault? That he had published it.

On 14 January 2010, an intimidating letter was sent to Michele Albanese, a correspondent from Polistena for the *Quotidiano della Calabria*. The message said: «Wash your mouth before you speak about Rosarno», and a black cross was drawn on the white sheet. Albanese was covering the immigrants’ riot against their exploitation in the fields where they work picking oranges.

On 15 February 2010, reporter Filippo Cutrupi’s sister received the following threat: «Don’t write “the ‘*ndrangheta* is attacking the State”, anymore», which quoted the Cutrupi’s article published the day before, about the bombs found in front of the Public Prosecutor’s office.

In Calabria, a journalist is in danger also when he or she gives a news already written by the national newspapers. Guido Scarpino of *Calabria Ora* reported the violent incursions – Clockwork Orange style – of a group of misfits belonging to the Paola clan. Every newspaper and TV had reported the news, but Scarpino was the only one

to be threatened. On 8 July 2010, he was called on the intercom and he heard crying: «Stop writing such things, or we'll kill you».

They are watched, shadowed, stalked. Giovanni Verduci, correspondent from Siderno of the *Quotidiano della Calabria*, is called by a male voice: «We know who you are and where you live». You cannot feel safe even in your own house. And on 20 July 2010, Antonio Anastasi, correspondent from Crotona for the *Quotidiano della Calabria* received a threatening call, as well. Four years ago he risked his life: he was beaten up by three individuals covered in hoods, very close to his office.

Ferdinando Piccolo, a 23-year-old correspondent from San Luca for the *Quotidiano della Calabria*, was “warned” twice in ten days, on 11 and 21 September. He had reported the story of an unfinished street between Polsi and San Luca, the works stopped for twenty years. The same old story of some contract, and a lot of money, 12 million euro, that somehow disappeared. Two letters threatening him and his family were delivered by hand in front of his father’s shop. The first one included five bullets.

«Going too far means death»

When a journalist receives a bullet, the message is clear. Michele Inserra, a journalist of the *Quotidiano della Calabria*, received a 12-bore bullet. It was a shotgun bullet. With his name on it. He had written about San Luca and the families involved in the Duisburg massacre. His article could have damaged some delicate dynamics. He had gone too far. Yet another example is Beppe Baldassarro, a reporter for the *Quotidiano della Calabria* and for the *Repubblica* in Reggio Calabria. On 22 February, he received a bullet and an anonymous letter composed of cuttings from his article “Going too far means death”. The message was clear: stop writing about the relationship between the members of a Reggio Calabria clan and some candidates running in the regional elections. He had only reported the content of the trial documents against the Crucitti clan.

On 21 May 2010, freelancer Leonardo Rizzo received an envelope with some bullets and had his electrical cables cut. Three years ago, he risked dying by asphyxiation when three Molotov cocktails were fired onto his house’s main door. Someone sent an envelope with bullets to the President of the regional Order of Journalists Giuseppe Soluri, which was intercepted by the Italian post office. Some say it did not have anything to do with his activity as a journalist.

«This gasoline isn’t for your car, but for you. Stop writing about the ‘*ndrangheta*, follow Paolo Pollichieni and get out of here». This message was found by Lucio Musolino, 27 years old, ex-reporter for *Calabria Ora*, on 1 August 2010, inside a petrol can left on his porch. His editor in chief Paolo Pollichieni had just resigned, along with other eight journalists, because of a dispute with the publisher. Musolino, a trial reporter, covered the most important investigations of the Reggio Calabria clans. Before receiving the warning, he had investigated the alleged relationship between the ‘*ndrangheta* and the Governor of Calabria, Giuseppe Scopelliti.

Politics and mafia. Threats also struck Fabio Buonofiglio, a blogger of Sibari.net. A long series of threats that begin on 5 January 2010, when Buonofiglio reported the alleged connection between the Strafaces, a well-known family of Corigliano Calabro – whose mayor is Pasqualina Straface – and the local ‘*ndrangheta* clans. The mayor and her brothers – well-known entrepreneurs – were imprisoned on 21 July 2011. Two

*pentiti*⁶ accused them and told prosecutors about the alleged electoral support to Straface from mafia members. Sibari.net published all the documents, the minutes, the interrogations. More warnings arrived through the internet: «Buonofiglio, sooner or later, by hook or by crook, you'll stop spreading poison against Corigliano». Then, he was threatened in person, as well. On 28 September 2010, during a press conference held by the vice president of parliamentary anti-mafia commission, he heard a local criminal saying: «Now we'll do something with Buonofiglio». The threat was considered credible.

Journalists are insulted also at the seat of the institutions. This happens, too. On 16 September 2011, Giuseppe Merduri, media advisor for the Region of Calabria, is verbally and physically assaulted at the seat of the region during a meeting between the governor and a few mayors. Seven days before that, on 9 September, someone breaks into Emiliano Morrone's house. Morrone is a journalist and the author, together with Francesco Saverio Alessio, of *La società sparente* ("The fading society"), an investigation into the 'ndrangheta and political power. A strange burglary. The burglars steal two personal computers and a bag full of trial documents, notices, phone numbers, but leave the computer which is not used for work. Morrone had already received threats because of his book. Both authors had to leave Calabria. And we all know that this is just the latest sophisticated attempt to silence a journalist.

⁶ People in Italy who, formerly part of criminal or terrorist organizations, following their arrests decide to "repent" and collaborate with the judicial system to help investigations. Their correct technical name in Italian is collaboratori di giustizia (collaborators with justice).