

= Vito Cascioferro =

Vito Cascioferro or Vito Cascio Ferro (January 22 , 1862 ? September 20 , 1943) , also known as Don Vito , was a prominent member of the Sicilian Mafia . He also operated for several years in the United States . He is often depicted as the " boss of bosses " , although such a position does not exist in the loose structure of Cosa Nostra in Sicily .

Cascioferro 's life is full of myth and mystery . He became a legend even when he was alive , and that legend is partially responsible for creating the image of the gallant gentleman capomafia (Mafia boss) . He is widely considered to have been responsible for the 1909 murder of Joseph Petrosino , head of the New York City police department 's Italian Squad . However , he was never convicted of the crime .

With the rise of Fascism in Italy , his untouchable position declined . He was arrested and sentenced to death in 1930 and would remain in jail until his death . There is some confusion about the exact year of his death , but according to La Stampa , Cascioferro died on September 20 , 1943 , in the prison on the island of Procida .

= = Early life = =

Although many sources have identified him as a native of the rural town of Bisacquino , where he was raised , he was actually born in the city of Palermo . His parents , Accursio Cascioferro and Santa Ippolito , were poor and illiterate . The family moved to Bisacquino when his father became a campiere (an armed guard) with the local landlord , Baron Antonino Inglese , a notorious usurper of state @-@ owned land . The position of campiere often involved Mafiosi . According to other sources , at an early age , the family moved to Sambuca Zabut , where he lived for approximately 24 years before relocating to Bisacquino , his recognized power base in the Mafia .

Cascioferro never went to any school . When still young , Cascioferro married a teacher from Bisacquino , Brigida Giaccone , who instructed him how to read and write . He was inducted into the Mafia in the 1880s . He worked as a revenue collector as a young adult , using the position as a cover to carry out his protection racket . His criminal record began with an assault in 1884 and progressed through extortion , arson , and menacing , and eventually to the kidnapping of the 19 @-@ year @-@ old Baroness Clorinda Peritelli di Valpetrosa in June 1898 , for which he received a three @-@ year sentence .

= = Revolutionary mafioso = =

While incarcerated for attempted extortion , Cascioferro was recruited into the Fasci Siciliani (Sicilian Leagues) , a popular movement of democratic and socialist inspiration , by Bernardino Verro , the president of the League in Corleone . The Leagues needed muscle in their social struggle of 1893 ? 94 . Cascioferro became the president of the Fascio of Bisacquino .

In January 1894 , the Fasci were outlawed and brutally repressed on the orders of Prime Minister Francesco Crispi . Many leaders were put in jail ; Cascioferro fled to Tunis for a year . After serving his sentence for his role in the peasant unrest , Cascioferro returned to a position of social power and pressured authorities in Palermo to put him in charge of granting emigration permits in the district of Corleone . According to Mafia historian Salvatore Lupo , Cascioferro was involved in clandestine emigration networks .

= = In the United States = =

Sentenced for the kidnapping of the Baroness of Valpetrosa in 1898 , Cascioferro was released in 1900 . To escape special police surveillance in Sicily , he sailed to the United States and arrived in New York City at the end of September 1901 . He lived for about 21 ? 2 years in New York , acting as an importer of fruits and foods . He also spent six months in New Orleans .

On May 21 , 1902 , Cascioferro was arrested in connection with a large counterfeiting operation in

Hackensack , New Jersey . He was arrested at the barbershop of Giuseppe Romano on First Avenue that had been distributing the counterfeit money . Cascioferro managed to escape conviction ? his alibi was that he worked at a paper mill ? while the other gang members were tried and sentenced .

In New York , he became associated with the Morello gang in Harlem , headed by Giuseppe Morello and Ignazio Lupo . In September 1904 , he returned to Sicily shortly after police sergeant Joseph Petrosino of the New York City Police Department ordered his arrest for involvement with the Barrel Murder ; his application for American citizenship was consequently blocked . Petrosino traced him to New Orleans , where Cascioferro had gone to escape detection , but he had already slipped away .

Some observers consider Cascioferro as the one who brought the extortion practice of " continuing protection " in exchange for protection money (pizzo) from Sicily to the United States . " You have to skim the cream off the milk without breaking the bottle , " he summarized the system . " Don 't throw people into bankruptcy with ridiculous demands for money . Offer them protection instead , help them to make their business prosperous , and not only will they be happy to pay but they 'll kiss your hands out of gratitude . "

= = Back in Sicily = =

Back in Sicily , Cascioferro rose to the position of a local notable . He was the capo elettore (ward heeler) of Domenico De Michele Ferrantelli , the mayor of Burgio and member of Parliament for the district of Bivona , as well as on good terms with the Baron Inglese . He exercised influence over several Mafia cosche (clans) in the towns of Bisacquino , Burgio , Campofiorito , Chiusa Sclafani , Contessa Entellina , Corleone , and Villafranca Sicula , as well as some districts in the city of Palermo .

A semi @-@ factual and romantic portrait by journalist Luigi Barzini contributed much to form the legend of Don Vito :

Don Vito brought the organization to its highest perfection without undue recourse to violence . The Mafia leader who scatters corpses all over the island in order to achieve his goal is considered as inept as the statesman who has to wage aggressive wars . Don Vito ruled and inspired fear mainly by the use of his great qualities and natural ascendancy . His awe @-@ inspiring appearance helped him . ? His manners were princely , his demeanour humble but majestic . He was loved by all . Being very generous by nature , he never refused a request for aid and dispensed millions in loans , gifts and general philanthropy . He would personally go out of his way to redress a wrong . When he started a journey , every major , dressed in his best clothes , awaited him at the entrance of his village , kissed his hands , and paid homage , as if he were a king . And he was a king of sorts : under his reign peace and order were observed , the Mafia peace , of course , which was not what the official law of the Kingdom of Italy would have imposed , but people did not stop to draw too fine a distinction .

Police reports described Cascioferro as notoriously associated with the " high " Mafia , leading a life of luxury , going to the theater , cafés , gambling high sums at the Circolo dei Civili ? a club for gentlemen , reserved for those with pretensions to education and elite status .

= = The Petrosino murder = =

Cascioferro is considered to be the mastermind behind the murder of New York policeman and head of the Italian Squad , Joseph Petrosino , on March 12 , 1909 . He was shot and killed in Piazza Marina in Palermo ; two men were seen running from the crime scene . Petrosino had gone to Sicily to gather information from local police files to help deport Italian gangsters from New York as illegal immigrants . The two men were very much aware of the danger to each other 's survival ; Petrosino carried a note describing Cascioferro as ? a terrible criminal ? , while Cascioferro had a photograph of the police officer .

Many accounts claim that Cascioferro personally killed Petrosino . Legend has it that Cascioferro

excused himself from a dinner party among the high society at the home of his political patron De Michele Ferrantelli , took a carriage (that of his host according to some) , and drove to Piazza Marina in Palermo 's city centre . He and Petrosino engaged in a brief conversation , then Cascioferro killed Petrosino and returned to join the dinner again . Historical reconstructions have dismissed this version and cannot locate Cascioferro at the scene of the crime .

News of the murder spread fast in U.S. newspapers and a swell of anti @-@ Italian sentiment spread across New York . Cascioferro pleaded his innocence and provided an alibi for the entire period when Petrosino was assassinated . He stayed in the house of De Michele Ferrantelli in Burgio . However , the alibi provided by De Michele Ferrantelli was suspicious , taking into account the relation between the two . Moreover , while in jail after his arrest and life sentence in 1930 , Cascioferro apparently claimed that he had killed Petrosino . According to writer Arrigo Petacco in his 1972 book on Joe Petrosino , Cascioferro said : " In my whole life I have killed only one person , and I did that disinterestedly ? Petrosino was a brave adversary , and deserved better than a shameful death at the hands of some hired cut @-@ throat . "

A report by Baldassare Ceola , the police commissioner of Palermo , concluded that the crime had probably been carried out by Mafiosi Carlo Costantino and Antonino Passananti under Cascioferro 's direction . Evidence was thin , however , and the case was effectively closed when in July 1911 the Palermo Court of Appeals discharged Cascioferro , as well as Costantino and Passananti , due to insufficient evidence to send them to trial . Petrosino 's murder was never solved . Nevertheless , Costantino and Passananti were identified as the most likely assassins . Costantino died in the late 1930s and Passananti , in March 1969 . In 2014 , more than a century after the assassination , the Italian police overheard a tapped phone conversation in which a sibling claimed that Paolo Palazzotto had been the killer on the orders of Cascioferro . Palazzotto had been arrested after the shooting , but had been released for lack of evidence .

= = Downfall = =

In 1923 , the sub @-@ prefect of Corleone warned the Ministry of Interior that Cascioferro was " one of the worst offenders , quite capable of committing any crime . " In May 1925 , he was arrested as the instigator of a murder . He was able to be released on bail , as usual . However , with the rise of Fascism , his reputation and immunity was declining .

In May 1926 , Prefect Cesare Mori , under orders from Fascist leader Benito Mussolini to destroy the Mafia , arrested Cascioferro in a big round @-@ up in the area that included Corleone and Bisacquino . More than 150 people were arrested . Cascioferro 's godson asked the local landlord to intervene , but he refused : " Times have changed " , was the reply . He was indicted for participation in 20 murders , eight attempted murders , five robberies with violence , 37 acts of extortion , and 53 other offences including physical violence and threats .

He was sentenced to life on June 27 , 1930 , on the old murder charge . He remained silent during the trial . Cascioferro had been arrested some 69 times before and always had been acquitted , but this time it was different . After hearing the sentence the president of the court asked Cascioferro if he had something to say in his defense . Cascioferro stood up and said : " Gentlemen , as you have been unable to obtain proof of any of the numerous crimes I have committed , you have been reduced to condemning me for the only one I never committed . " The " iron prefect " , as Mori was known , wanted to give maximum publicity to the event . He had posters printed with pictures of Cascioferro and the text of the court sentence .

= = Death and legacy = =

There is uncertainty about the exact date of his death . The most common account is that he died of natural causes in 1945 while serving his sentence at Ucciardone prison in Palermo . Italian author Petacco found evidence for his 1972 book on Joe Petrosino that Cascioferro may have died of dehydration in the summer of 1943 . According to Petacco , Cascioferro was left behind in his cell by prison guards while other inmates were evacuated in advance of the Allied invasion of Sicily .

However , according to historian Giuseppe Carlo Marino , Cascioferro was transferred to another prison in Pozzuoli in 1940 , and the octogenarian was left to die during an Allied bombardment of that prison in 1943 (other sources mention 1942) . According to La Stampa , Cascioferro died on September 20 , 1943 , in the prison on the island of Procida .

For years , a sentence believed to be carved by Cascioferro was legible on the wall of his Ucciardone cell : " Prison , sickness , and necessity , reveal the real heart of a man . " Inmates considered occupying Don Vito 's former cell a great honour . Historians consider this account a legend rather than fact .