

Mafia, Kinds of Applause & Saviano's Quotes

Judith Harris (April 29, 2010)



A confusion of applause: ovation at Perugia for Italy's heroic Roberto Saviano and hurrahs at Reggio for arrested 'Ndrangheta boss Giovanni Tegano

ROME - The applause at the capture of Calabria's most wanted mobster on the night of April 26 will go down in the annals of Italian organized crime. Giovanni Tegano, 70-year-old boss of the region's capital of organized crime, Reggio, was wanted for seventeen years on charges of homicide, arms trafficking and Mafia association, according to the Italian press. When he was brought into police headquarters in handcuffs, the police applauded the team of their fellow male and female detectives who had finally captured him together with five younger associates. A jubilant Interior Minister Roberto Maroni sent congratulations.



But it was the applause the next morning that made the real headlines. Outside the Questura headquarters at Reggio a crowd of some 500 people applauded, not the police for their sleuthing, but Tegano himself, shamefully hailed as friend and martyr and—as several admirers shouted—“a man of peace.” As if this were St. Peter’s Square, a child was held overhead in the crowd for Tegano’s presumed blessing—and indeed the kindly-looking, white-haired crime boss in handcuffs managed to wave benignly and smile to his faithful followers.

A second shameful incident occurred over the weekend in Palermo. Mafia investigating magistrate Giovanni Falcone, his wife Francesca and three police bodyguards were murdered by the Mafia on the highway between Palermo and its airport in an explosion in May 23, 1992. Ever since then the tree in front of the apartment building in which the couple lived has been a symbol of resistance to the Sicilian Mafia. But on Saturday vandals stripped off the photos, poems and letters written in his memory and attached to the tree by well-wishers, especially schoolchildren.

At Perugia that same evening author-journalist Roberto Saviano, sharing the platform with former US Vice President Al Gore, addressed a packed theater as part of the annual International Journalism Festival. Exactly like Tegano in Reggio, Saviano is a hunted man, but for the opposite reason. Saviano’s book published in 2006, *Gomorra*, details the activities of the vicious Neapolitan organized crime networks that thrive by dumping toxic waste wherever it suits them and by controlling the Neapolitan docks where containers bring cheap Chinese goods (people, too) into Europe. Translated into 42 languages, with over three million copies were sold, in 2008 this literary phenomnon evolved into a wildly successful and horrifying movie whose director, Matteo Garrone, also won major prizes. For Saviano, all this success spelled personal disaster. He has received so many death threats that, like Salman Rushdie, he lives in perpetual danger and cannot be without bodyguards.

The Italian offshoot of Al Gore’s non-profit investigative journalism TV channel, Current TV, featured a long interview with Saviano a week ago on its Italian platform, SkyTG24. Over-directed, with busy visual and sound effects that tended to obscure Saviano himself, the documentary was nevertheless fascinating and eloquent.

While Saviano and Gore spoke in the packed Perugia theater hundreds braved the chilly spring wind outside to follow the discussion on TV. They had lined up hours ahead of the debate in hopes of getting inside; luckily I had a ticket and managed to squeeze into a cramped seat at the back of a box on the fourth tier. Appropriately for the arrest of Tegano, Saviano quoted Mafia victim Paolo Borsellino, who worked with Falcone in prosecuting the so-called “Maxi-Trial” in Palermo, saying: “You don’t decapitate the Mafia. You eradicate it.” It is important, Saviano added, that any anti-Mafia struggle not be perceived as part of an ideological battle. However, “When the Center-left [coalitions] were in power, they said I defamed the Campania. And now that Center-right is in power, they are saying it.”

Last week Premier Silvio Berlusconi claimed that non-fiction books about organized crime such as *Gomorra*, mentioned specifically, and works of fiction have a boomerang effect by glamorizing the Mafia. To this allegation Saviano responded, “It’s painful to think that, when there’s a fire, you get mad at the firemen.” What he hopes, he concluded, is that words like “honor” can be restored to all Italians. “Truth brings honor to a country. It’s not being truthful to speak of ‘men of honor’.”

When Saviano spoke about how the mob works—he spelled out its connections with the politicians—he was obviously deeply moved. So was the audience, and he, exactly like the mobsters in the Calabrian street, was applauded by his fans, which is to say by that Italy which rejects and resists all the mobs. Indeed, Saviano’s standing ovation went on so long that, even from our distant viewpoint, he seemed close to tears. He was not alone.

A translated segment of Roberto Saviano’s talk in Perugia is at:

<http://bambuser.com/channel/fieldreports/broadcast/713091> [2] His official website is:



<http://www.robertosaviano.it/index.php?LANG=ES> [3]

Both Tegano's nighttime arrival at the Questura and the daytime applause can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFFENeeJGL4> [4]. (The text, quoting an AP report states incorrectly that "scores" of people died in the two years of 'Ndrangheta warfare which left Tegano the victor in the early Nineties. That figure is actually estimated at 600, or almost one a day, similarly to the Mafia wars of Sicily in the Eighties.)

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[4] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFFENeeJGL4>