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Episode #075

The Camorra | Naples' Secret Society

July 28, 2020



[00:00:00] Hello, hello, hello and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English. The show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The Camorra, the organised crime structure that [originates¹](#) in Naples, but has [tentacles²](#) that stretch all over the world.

[00:00:35] We'll talk about what the Camorra is, where it comes from, how it got to where it is today, and discuss how [inseparable³](#) it is in many ways from life in Naples.

¹ starts, begins

² the legs of an octopus

³ unable to be removed



[00:00:48] It is an intriguing story, and I'm excited to share it with you today.

[00:00:54] So, let's get started.

[00:00:57] Naples, if you haven't ever been there before, is an absolutely amazing city, like nowhere else in Italy.

[00:01:06] There's a famous phrase, which is 'see Naples and then die', meaning that once you have seen the city, you can die peacefully, because nothing else in the world can match it.

[00:01:19] We aren't going to be talking specifically about Naples today, but we are going to be talking about an organisation that is [inextricably⁴](#) linked to the city and the surrounding region.

[00:01:32]

[00:01:39] While it would be easy to just skip forward to the modern day, the origins of the Camorra are pretty interesting, and really help you understand how it got to be so [rooted⁵](#) in its home city.

[00:01:55] Although where the Camorra originally comes from is a little debated, historians tend to agree that it started to emerge around the 17th or 18th century.

⁴ very closely related

⁵ stuck in, connected to



[00:02:08] It started as local gangs that would just live off [petty](#)⁶ criminal activity, but by the mid 19th century the Camorra had grown and grown, and its members held a lot of power in the city of Naples.

[00:02:25] Now, as a reminder, until 1861, Italy was a collection of different city states; the unified country that we know today didn't exist.

[00:02:38] In 1848 there were a series of revolutions in Italy where liberals sought to [overthrow](#)⁷ the monarchs that were ruling their states.

[00:02:50] In Naples, the liberals paid the Camorra to [drum up](#)⁸, to get support for the revolution.

[00:02:59] The Camorra had influence over the city's poor, and the liberals knew that they would need their support to [overthrow](#) the king.

[00:03:09] Of course, this support came with a price, and not just a financial one.

[00:03:16] Members of the Camorra were rewarded by the liberals with positions of power within the local government, and they soon found themselves no longer just a series of street criminals, but with influence in local politics and government.

⁶ small

⁷ to remove from power

⁸ get support or attention for something



[00:03:34] When the Italian [unification](#)⁹ was finally achieved, on March 17, 1861, the new government found that within Naples, the Camorristi, the members of the Camorra, they had managed to [infiltrate](#)¹⁰ the city's [bureaucracy](#)¹¹, and so the new government started a campaign to try to get rid of them.

[00:03:56] And although some were removed, over 150 years later, the Camorra still [exerts](#)¹² a powerful hold over large parts of the city, the surrounding area, other parts of Italy, and even [further afield](#)¹³.

[00:04:14] There are a few aspects to the Camorra that are worth pointing out in terms of explaining how they have managed to maintain and grow their power.

[00:04:25] Firstly, from a structural point of view, the Camorra is organised very differently to things like the Sicilian mafia.

[00:04:36] With a Sicilian-style mafia, there's usually one large boss, a godfather-type figure, and the organisation extends downwards in a pyramid-type formation.

⁹ combining two or more things to create one thing, e.g. a country

¹⁰ to become part of something (often in a secret way)

¹¹ the work of government

¹² to use your power or strength in order to make something else happen

¹³ far away



[00:04:51] With the Camorra, it's much more horizontal, or at least, there are more smaller pyramids. It's divided into a series of [clans](#), often along family lines, each with its own boss.

[00:05:08] The first impact of this is that they are harder to get rid of. A new [clan](#)¹⁴ is relatively easy to form, and breaking up one, or capturing one boss doesn't do much to the overall organisation.

[00:05:25] And secondly, these bosses of the [clans](#) have enormous power on a [hyperlocal](#)¹⁵ level, and getting anything done in a local area often requires the approval, support or help of the local [clan](#) leader.

[00:05:42] What this means is that some [ruthless](#)¹⁶ politicians [enlist](#)¹⁷ these leaders to get people to vote in local elections, and in return, the bosses are able to [exert](#) a large amount of power over their local government.

[00:06:00] So the result of these two structural elements means that the Camorra is [entwined](#)¹⁸ with a lot of Neapolitan life, its approval and help is required to get many things done, much like it was in 1848.

¹⁴ criminal gang families

¹⁵ on a very small local level

¹⁶ determined to do something and not afraid to hurt others in the process

¹⁷ to get the support of

¹⁸ closely linked



[00:06:17] But the Camorra hasn't stood still for the past 170 years, and as a criminal organisation, its interests and businesses have expanded, and become [immensely](#)¹⁹ more profitable.

[00:06:33] It would be hard to tell this story without mentioning one particular individual, Paulo Di Lauro.

[00:06:40] Now, Di Lauro is probably the man who has had the largest influence on the Camorra.

[00:06:47] Not a huge amount is actually known about a lot of his life, but here is at least what is believed.

[00:06:55] He was born in 1953, and he joined the [clan](#) of an [eccentric](#)²⁰ local boss, a man called Aniello La Monica.

[00:07:05] He was given responsibility over the [clan's](#) accounts, over their finances, in around 1975, and it was here that he saw quite how much money the [clan](#) was making.

[00:07:19] The [clan's](#) main business activities at the time were things like [extortion](#)²¹, black-market cigarettes, construction, and that kind of stuff.

[00:07:30] They made a lot of money, but Di Lauro had a better idea.

¹⁹ very much

²⁰ behaving in a way that is unusual

²¹ getting money from someone by threatening them



[00:07:35] Drugs.

[00:07:37] He thought that by starting to deal in things like cocaine, heroin, and cannabis, the [clan](#) could make significantly more money.

[00:07:47] He persuaded his boss, La Monica, to go for it.

[00:07:51] The [clan](#) started dealing drugs, and as you might imagine, they started making a lot more money almost immediately.

[00:08:01] Then two things happened that really changed the fate of Di Lauro, and you could also say, of the Camorra.

[00:08:10] Firstly, in 1980 there was a huge earthquake in Naples, which destroyed a lot of the housing in the city centre.

[00:08:21] The local government built [vast²²](#) new housing blocks to the north of the city, where the city's poor were moved to.

[00:08:30] These would become ideal places for drug dealing, as we'll find out shortly.

[00:08:36] Then, in 1982, Di Lauro's boss, La Monica, was murdered. The king was dead, and Di Lauro had his chance to take over control.

²² very large



[00:08:48] Now, it has been [alleged](#)²³ that Di Lauro himself ordered for his boss to be murdered, and several [supergrasses](#)²⁴, criminals who give evidence to the police, several [supergrasses](#) have come forward and [implicated](#)²⁵ Di Lauro directly in the murder.

[00:09:08] La Monica's death certainly was convenient for Di Lauro, and he seized the opportunity to become the new boss.

[00:09:18] These new apartment blocks to the north of the city became [wholesale](#)²⁶ drug markets.

[00:09:25] Their design made them almost the perfect place for selling drugs without the fear of being caught by the police. They had [vast](#) internal areas, and they could be closed off from the outside.

[00:09:40] They were often in large, open areas, so if there was a police raid, the [lookouts](#)²⁷, the guards, they would warn everyone immediately, and there would be enough time so that when the police did get in, they wouldn't find anything illegal going on there.

²³ claimed

²⁴ a criminal who gives information to the police in order to have a reduced sentence

²⁵ suggested that someone took part in a crime

²⁶ in large volumes and low prices

²⁷ a person who looks out for other criminals or the police



[00:10:01] This turned the area to the north of Naples, areas called Scampia and Secondigliano, into the largest open air drug markets in the world.

[00:10:12] The drugs were cheap, and it was a place that people would come to from all over Italy to buy drugs without fear of being caught by the police.

[00:10:24] Di Lauro controlled this area, and he grew fantastically rich off the profits.

[00:10:32] Unlike the sort of gangster that you might be imagining though, he kept a very low profile, and was practically anonymous.

[00:10:41] People knew of him, of this [mythical](#)²⁸ figure that controlled the area, but they didn't know who he actually was.

[00:10:51] He didn't have the [flashy](#)²⁹ cars, he didn't throw big parties, or carry a weapon. And that was the plan.

[00:11:00] He knew that key to his survival was staying [undercover](#)³⁰. He was running a multi-million dollar criminal enterprise, and if the police knew his identity, his life would be made an awful lot harder.

[00:11:17] But, as with almost any life of crime, the good times don't last, and sometimes bad news comes from the most unexpected of areas.

²⁸ imagined or invented

²⁹ big, bright and expensive

³⁰ secretly



[00:11:29] Di Lauro had a large family, with 11 children in total.

[00:11:34] At school one day, one of his children was [slapped](#)³¹ by a teacher as a punishment for shouting in class.

[00:11:42] Some members of the clan decided that this [slap](#)³² on the child was an insult on the clan, and they went to beat up the teacher.

[00:11:55] The teacher [filed](#)³³ an official complaint, and Di Lauro, as the boy's father, was called into a police station to respond to questions about the assault on the teacher.

[00:12:09] Although Di Lauro said he didn't know anything about it, the police took pictures of him, they took [mugshots](#)³⁴, and they then released him. He said that he was just a shopkeeper, and as he wasn't known to the police, he was just let go.

[00:12:28] But, for several years, the police had been [tapping](#)³⁵ the phone lines of the clan, they had been conducting surveillance and listening to their conversations.

³¹ hit

³² see 'slapped'

³³ give an official document

³⁴ photos taken of criminals

³⁵ secretly listening to a phone line



[00:12:39] They had never heard the name Di Lauro, but there was frequent talk of someone called Pasquale, or The Rabbit Man.

[00:12:48] When Di Lauro was released, the police overheard people talking about Pasquale being released, and it was clear that this Pasquale and Paolo Di Lauro were the same person.

[00:13:02] Di Lauro was obviously pretty scared by this [encounter](#)³⁶.

[00:13:06] He was now known to the police, and he retreated further and further, moving from [safehouse](#)³⁷ to [safehouse](#), [paranoid](#)³⁸ that the [game was up](#)³⁹, and that he was going to be captured by the police.

[00:13:21] However, despite the police knowing who he really was, they had to prove the case.

[00:13:28] Even if they did know where he was, which they didn't, they couldn't just walk in there and arrest him.

³⁶ meeting

³⁷ a house that someone would go to to avoid being found

³⁸ believing that you cannot trust other people

³⁹ the end had arrived



[00:13:36] For the next 4 years they built up evidence, and finally issued a [warrant](#)⁴⁰ for his arrest in 2002. But it wasn't to be until 3 years later that he was found, hiding in the apartment of an old lady in Secondigliano, [bang in the middle](#)⁴¹ of his territory.

[00:13:58] He is now in a maximum security prison, under 24hr surveillance, and he still claims that he is only a shopkeeper.

[00:14:08] Italy has this law called 41-bis, which is a punishment reserved for serious organised crime leaders. It involves complete isolation, 24 hour surveillance, no contact with any other prisoners, no news, and the only allowed visits are those from lawyers, and there is one visit from one family for one hour a month.

[00:14:36] It's obviously incredibly [testing](#)⁴², and the idea is that you [cave](#)⁴³, you give in, and give the police information on other members of your organisation.

[00:14:48] Di Lauro has been under this 41-bis regime since he was put in prison, but he hasn't said a word.

[00:14:56] He has remained completely silent for the past 15 years.

⁴⁰ an official document (e.g. for an arrest)

⁴¹ right in the middle

⁴² very difficult

⁴³ give up, finally change your mind



[00:15:02] And although Di Lauro has gone, there is a new generation of Camorristi. This time though, they're not exactly like the last.

[00:15:12] They're younger, more [social media savvy](#)⁴⁴, and far more [ostentatious](#)⁴⁵.

[00:15:17] Roberto Saviano, the author of the famous book Gomorra that really showed the world how far the Camorra's influence stretches, he published a book in 2018 all about this new generation.

[00:15:34] In Italian it's called La Paranza dei bambini, which means a little fishing boat of kids. But in English it was translated as The Piranhas.

[00:15:46] This book tells the story of a group of young boys that are the new generation of the Camorra.

[00:15:54] They are ambitious, fearless, and [lack](#)⁴⁶ any of the historical understanding that their older generations had, so they aren't afraid to show the world their [ill-gotten gains](#)⁴⁷ and their [lavish](#)⁴⁸ lifestyle.

[00:16:11] This does seem to make things easier for the police though. Unlike Di Lauro hiding in the shadows, with few even knowing what he looked like, these teenagers

⁴⁴ know how to use social media

⁴⁵ like showing off, likes showing how rich they are

⁴⁶ not having (something)

⁴⁷ profits from illegal activities

⁴⁸ large and impressive



rob, steal and drug deal in the city centre, and [flash](#)⁴⁹ everything on social media for everything to see.

[00:16:31] And the results of posting all this stuff on social media are as you might expect.

[00:16:39] In 2018 42 members of these Piranha groups were arrested by the police and sentenced to a combined 500 years in prison, and there are frequent sad stories of these young boys killing each other on the streets of Naples.

[00:16:58] There's lots more about the Camorra that we aren't going to have the chance to speak about today, from fashion to construction, to rubbish collection, but I want to finish with one particular personal story in today's episode.

[00:17:15] Now, I actually lived in Naples for 6 months, back in 2008. Not long, I know, but long enough to have experienced some of this, [albeit](#)⁵⁰ from a distance.

[00:17:29] I was doing an ERASMUS placement, learning Italian and Mandarin at the university there.

[00:17:36] I lived by the train station, which, if you have ever been to Naples, you will know that it's not the nicest area of the city, but it's certainly not the middle of Camorra territory.

⁴⁹ to display

⁵⁰ used to reduce the importance of what was just said



[00:17:48] On one of my last nights living there, we had a small party. We weren't particularly loud at all, but obviously we were loud enough to have upset some of the people who lived in the nearby apartments.

[00:18:03] But if you have a problem like this in Naples, you don't call the police.

[00:18:08] We found this out the following morning.

[00:18:11] At probably 8 o'clock there was a [battering⁵¹](#) on the door, and [bleary eyed⁵²](#), I went to the door.

[00:18:20] As I opened it, a group of probably 10 men pushed straight into the apartment, and formed a big circle around me.

[00:18:30] This definitely wasn't how I'd imagined starting my day.

[00:18:35] They said that they had heard some complaints from the neighbours about noise, and had come to check that we weren't planning on doing it ever again.

[00:18:45] I don't think I've ever been more afraid in my life, and I'm sure that these men could see that. After a few minutes of discussion, where I gave them my word that it would never happen again, they left.

[00:18:59] Now, I spoke to a few Neapolitan friends about this afterwards, and it was pretty interesting what they had to say.

⁵¹ hitting hard

⁵² unable to see clearly



[00:19:09] Were they Camorra? Maybe they were, maybe they weren't. Who knows, and does it really matter?

[00:19:17] My friends didn't really seem to [think much of](#)⁵³ it.

[00:19:20] For them, was it such a bad thing that these men came to check out a complaint of too much noise?

[00:19:27] The police wouldn't do it, and so these men stepped in. Yes, they might be doing all sorts of other things that are hugely [detrimental](#)⁵⁴ for society, but in some cases they are filling the gaps that the state isn't able to fill.

[00:19:45] And this is perhaps the most important reason that the Camorra has managed to maintain its status as O' Sistema, The System.

[00:19:54] For many, it provides work, it provides security, it provides a sense of community, and a sense of belonging.

[00:20:03] And until the Italian state is able to replicate all of that in an effective way, then the Camorra isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

[00:20:16] OK then, that is it for today's episode on the Camorra. There is, of course, a lot more to say about it, and how it operates.

[00:20:24] If you are interested in this, I'd definitely recommend a few things.

⁵³ consider something important

⁵⁴ harmful, causing harm



[00:20:29] Firstly, Roberto Saviano's Gomorrah is an excellent place to start.

[00:20:34] There's the book, of course, but there's also a film inspired by it, and a TV series.

[00:20:39] All of these are excellent.

[00:20:42] They are in Italian, but perhaps you could watch them in Italian with English subtitles, that way you're at least practising your English a little bit.

[00:20:50] As always, I would love to know what you think of the show. We have quite a few members from Italy, so I would especially love to know what you thought of today's episode.

[00:21:02] You can email hi hi@leonardoenglish.com.

[00:21:08] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:21:13] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Originates	starts, begins
Tentacles	the legs of an octopus
Inseparable	unable to be removed
Inextricably	very closely related
Rooted	stuck in, connected to
Petty	small
Overthrow	to remove from power
Drum up	get support or attention for something
Unification	combining two or more things to create one thing, e.g. a country
Infiltrate	to become part of something (often in a secret way)
Bureaucracy	the work of government
Exerts	to use your power or strength in order to make something else happen
Further afield	far away



Clans	criminal gang families
Hyperlocal	on a very small local level
Ruthless	determined to do something and not afraid to hurt others in the process
Enlist	to get the support of
Entwined	closely linked
Immensely	very much
Eccentric	behaving in a way that is unusual
Extortion	getting money from someone by threatening them
Vast	very large
Alleged	claimed
Supergrasses	a criminal who gives information to the police in order to have a reduced sentence
Implicated	suggested that someone took part in a crime
Wholesale	in large volumes and low prices
Lookouts	a person who looks out for other criminals or the police
Mythical	imagined or invented



Flashy	big, bright and expensive
Undercover	secretly
Slapped	hit
Slap	see 'slapped'
Filed	give an official document
Mugshots	photos taken of criminals
Tapping	secretly listening to a phone line
Encounter	meeting
Safehouse	a house that someone would go to to avoid being found
Paranoid	believing that you cannot trust other people
Game was up	the end had arrived
Warrant	an official document (e.g. for an arrest)
Bang in the middle	right in the middle
Testing	very difficult
Cave	give up, finally change your mind



Social media savvy	know how to use social media
Ostentatious	like showing off, likes showing how rich they are
Lack	not having (something)
Ill-gotten gains	profits from illegal activities
Lavish	large and impressive
Flash	to display
Albeit	used to reduce the importance of what was just said
Battering	hitting hard
Bleary eyed	unable to see clearly
Think much of	consider something important
Detrimental	harmful, causing harm

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

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