

- Dov Levy

The Incredible Story of One Brave Man Who Infiltrated the Mafia

He infiltrated the Mafia, winning the trust of the most notorious mobsters—murderers who rarely let outsiders into their inner circle. For six years he successfully passed himself off as an up-and-coming gangster, living in constant danger of being discovered and executed. During that time he witnessed enough damning evidence to place leading Mafiosi behind bars for life. The question was: Would he make it out alive with his knowledge? Learn the story of “Donnie Brasco,” the Sicilian jewel thief... who never existed.

Our Man In The Mafia

“Hey Lefty, there’s a friend of mine here I’d like you to meet.” It was a typical day in March 1976, in a nightclub in Midtown Manhattan. The owner, Anthony Mirra, was calling to his friend, Benjamin “Lefty” Ruggiero. Lately, an interesting fellow had begun hanging out in the club and Mirra was excited to introduce him to Lefty.

“Who’s that?” Ruggiero asked.

The man was Donnie Brasco, a small-time yet very successful jewel thief. Mirra introduced Brasco to Lefty and the three-way chat quickly turned to the details of Brasco’s Sicilian ancestry. That and his criminal history were the common denominators that tied the men together. Soon, Brasco and Ruggiero were deep in animated discussion.

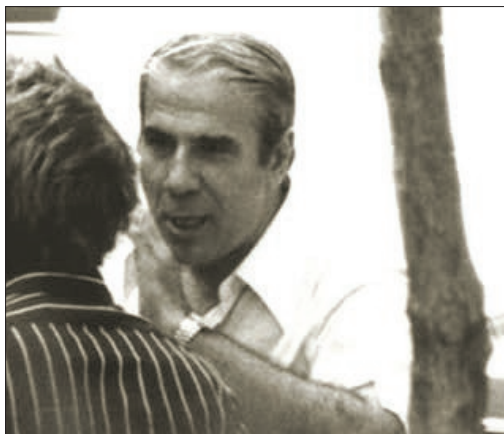
To the casual observer it looked like an innocent conversation, but beneath the surface much more was going on. Mirra was a *caporegime*, a captain in the Bonanno crime family. A violent and unpredictable man, he was alleged to have committed over 30 murders. Lefty Ruggiero was no better. A long-time Bonanno soldier, he bragged openly about the 28 assassinations under his belt over the course of 30 years. Mirra and Ruggiero were both personal friends as well as close business associates, and Mirra was excited at the prospect of bringing Brasco into their circle.

The expert jewel thief Brasco was an associate of the Colombo crime family. He had not been initiated into the Mafia as a “made man,” or official member. Mirra had been careful to introduce him as “a friend of mine” rather than “a friend of ours” to tip Ruggiero off about this vital fact. Nevertheless, Brasco struck Mirra as being a perfect candidate for their type of work.

Brasco had just the right balance: He was streetwise yet personable; an underworld professional who was intelligent as well as quick and eager to learn. Brasco was also very down to earth and made for a very amicable partner. He offered great potential for bringing in funds for the “family,” and recruiting him to their cause would advance all of their careers.



Rare photo of Bonanno soldier Benjamin “Lefty” Ruggiero, Brasco’s Mafia mentor and sponsor.



Rare photo of “capo” Anthony Mirra, who first introduced Brasco to the Bonanno crime family.

What neither Mirra nor Ruggiero realized was that Brasco was hiding a deep secret. His association with the Mafia had begun only a few months earlier. In reality, “Donnie the Jeweler” did not exist. He was nothing more than an undercover FBI agent, and accepting him into their ranks would ultimately seal the two men’s fate.

Who Is Donnie Brasco?

Joseph D. Pistone was born in Philadelphia in 1939, but his parents raised him in Paterson, New Jersey. The neighborhood was heavily Italian and Pistone grew up watching mobsters literally getting away

with murder and enjoying a life of relative luxury.

While his own parents were always respectful of the law, the people around him weren’t. “Everyone knew they were involved,” he said. “They had money and expensive cars. What you didn’t see was all the devious stuff that went on—the struggle for power, whacking [“assassinating” in Mafia parlance] guys.”

By the time Pistone graduated from university in 1965, he knew he wanted to go into law enforcement. He began with a job at the Office of Naval Intelligence. Pistone spent three years there, investigating drug deals and theft.

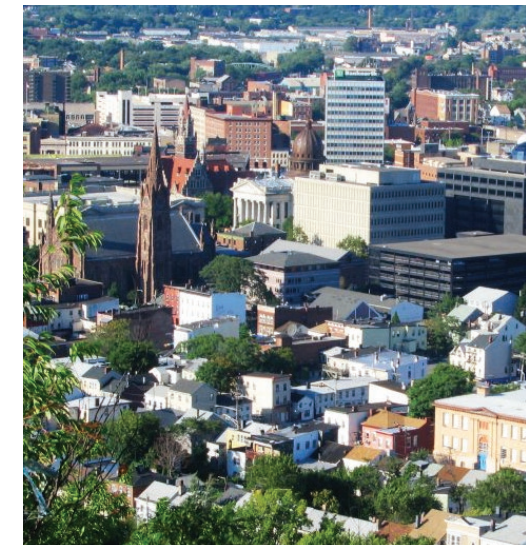
On July 7, 1969, he was recognized by the FBI and sworn in as an agent. Pistone’s superiors quickly recognized that his talents made him a natural for undercover work. His Sicilian background, his fluency in the unique Sicilian dialect of Italian and his familiarity with the lifestyle of the Mafiosi steered him into his first assignment to infiltrate the Mafia.

In 1974, Pistone was dispatched to New York City to work in the FBI’s “hijacking squad.” This office specialized in combatting armed thieves’ theft of delivery trucks, an occurrence so common that it warranted its own crime unit. A ring of vehicle thieves was stealing millions of dollars’ worth of trucks, tractors, luxury cars and even the occasional airplane for resale on the stolen goods market.

The FBI came up with a plan and called it Operation “Sun Apple,” because it involved both sunny Miami and the Big Apple. They created a new identity for Pistone, giving him a long criminal record as a car thief named Donnie Brasco. Working from apartments in New York and Tampa, Florida, Pistone slowly wormed his way into the den of thieves. They worked all across the eastern seaboard, stealing cars and trucks between New York and Florida.

Brasco succeeded, and in February 1976, the FBI and Florida Highway Patrol rounded up the entire gang of 30 criminals acting largely on information Pistone provided.

Much of the stolen property was recovered as well. That operation was considered the most valuable bust of a thievery ring in US history. Pistone later reported ruefully, “For my work I got a letter of commendation from Clarence M. Kelley, Director of the FBI, and an award of \$250.”



Downtown Paterson, New Jersey. The city has a multi-ethnic population which includes a strong Italian presence.



Jacob K. Javits Federal Building at 26 Federal Plaza in Manhattan is home to many federal offices. The FBI’s New York field office is located on the 23rd floor.