

International Hero: Giovanni Falcone from Memories to the Future

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On December 1st The Center for Italian Studies at Stony Brook University organized a conference in commemoration of the Italian Judge Giovanni Falcone, who was killed in 1992 in an explosion by the Mafia while passing the town of Capaci in Sicily.

At Stony Brook, Chief Prosecutor of the National Anti-Mafia Bureau, Pietro Grasso came to commemorate his dear colleague and friend Giovanni Falcone. At the same time, Grasso gave everybody clear evidence what Falcone did, and that fighting Mafia power and paying the high price of his own life was not useless at all. He was there to occupy his very sensitive work position and to continue this mission started by his brave colleague.

"To work with Mafia means to move oneself in a mined field," said Grasso. "You can never make a



false step and Falcone was fully aware of it.”

Grasso continued with the beginning of Falcone’s career, when he was called from Rocco Chinnici, (another magistrate victim of mafia) as assistant prosecutor of the Anti-mafia bureau in Palermo. Falcone has never been afraid of his job, which clearly implied a high risk of being murdered. This is because he did not want to subside to any member of the mafia; regardless they were implicated in connection with the politic of that time, and stop their illicit market. Grasso remembers when Falcone told him once “a coward dies many times a day, a brave only once.”

Grasso, however, did not want to display a man who was not “human.” Instead he recalled a lot of lunches and dinners spent together due to work, or simply a friendship that developed after collaborating so intensively in such a difficult moment for Italy and its fight against mafia.

During one of those lunches close to Catania, Falcone made the joke of how dangerous it was to be seated on the same table with him and clearly added that for him, his life was less worthy than the button he had in his jacket. This did not mean that his life was not important, rather that what he was working on was of extreme importance for Italy.

Judge Falcone was the first one to realize that the Mafia was a problem not just confined to the borders of Italy. If it was, there would have been an easier solution; however taking on the mafia was a problem which needed to be fought with cooperation of foreign police agencies of other countries involved such as the United States.

This is when Falcone began his frequent visits to the United States and his cooperation with the F.B.I. Carmine F. Russo, a former F.B.I. Special Agent, intervened in the conference, giving his contribution to the commemoration of the Italian judge through the years of collaborations. Russo did not hide his honor in being a Sicilian immigrant himself who moved to the United States at the age of nine years old with his family. He said it was very emotional to be sent to Rome first as Assistant Legal Attaché at the American Embassy in 1984, and then as Legal Attaché (Agent in charge) in 1996. It was clearly during his first appointment in Italy that he collaborated strictly with Falcone and also with Paolo Borsellino, Falcone’s colleague and friend who was also murdered in the same way only 57 days later by a bomb that mafia had planted near the home of Borsellino’s mother in Palermo.

Russo recalled several moments of close collaboration in Italy and in the United States and how it was striking that Falcone spent time in the F.B.I. training center with Russo and received all the information that his American colleagues could provide him during his investigation in the United States. Russo says we really were in “symbiosis” we were doing the same job for two different Governments, still we were also speaking the same language and were coming from the same culture.

The first time Falcone met Russo he asked him whether he could speak Italian and he said of course “sono italiano” and after a while Falcone, absorbed in his thought, complemented him again for his excellent Italian, Russo answered we can also speak in dialect “sugnu sicilianu”.

This collaboration between the United states and Italy was also celebrated, among many other speakers, by the presence of Chief/Administrative Justice for New York, Gail Prudenti. Prudenti began her speech with other Falcone’s unforgettable words, “You can kill a man, you cannot kill his ideas.” Even if Prudenti had never met him, she is a representative of Falcone’s ideas and she clearly expressed the same determination in doing her job which overcame fear and doubts. She did not hide the similar problems she has to face when fighting any sort of organized crime organizations on a daily basis. It is really admirable how appreciated Falcone was either from people who worked with him, regardless of their nationality, but above all with people who just met him through his actions and ideas which clearly will never die.



Grasso openly confesses that it is only by chance that he was not in the same car with Falcone and his wife on that accursed day. Falcone had recently accepted a transfer to Rome, this had been interpreted by many of his colleagues as a way to escape to a probable tragic destiny after the success of the maxi-trial, that he had set with Borsellino, which condemned 475 mafia bosses. However, Grasso says, Falcone accepted the transfer simply because he wanted to nationally coordinate the fight against mafia which could have been done only from the main office of the minister of justice in Rome. In this atmosphere Falcone did not have many friends even among his fellow colleagues, so he called Grasso to join him in Rome as he needed someone he could trust. Their strong relationship of mutual professional and personal esteem had already been built during the years of collaboration in Sicily.

Falcone and Grasso traveled back to their families in Palermo every weekend or anytime they really could. Falcone, for safety reasons, had a private jet at his disposal and he used to take Grasso to “give him a ride”. That Saturday, Falcone informed Grasso that he had to postpone the departure time of a few hours because he had to wait for his wife, who had some important affairs to sort out before leaving. Grasso said that if he had found a seat on a scheduled flight he would have left earlier. This is what happened as Grasso still keeps that boarding card BM0204 Rome-Palermo. Together with the boarding card he also keeps a lighter that Falcone had given to him not as a present, but rather as something to keep in custody. This was in case Falcone would have failed at his attempt to give up smoking and he was sure Grasso would have given it back to him.

Grasso quite moved, said that during the “dark moments” he takes that lighter in his hands and this gives him immediately strength and hope. The same strength and hope that he transmitted to all those in attendance of the conference, reminding us all that none of all these magistrates sacrifices was useless. As things have already changed and still will with his commitment and ours as a united community which across borders fights against the same enemy.

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