

# ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS





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**Episode #366**  
**New York's Five Families and The Business of Crime -**  
**Part I | History & Creation**  
**12th May, 2023**

[00:00:01] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] 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 talking about a disorganised bunch of criminals that evolved into a well-run criminal empire, making billions of dollars in the process.

[00:00:32] A violent force that murdered, [extorted](#)<sup>1</sup>, [intimidated](#)<sup>2</sup>, and stole to get what they wanted, but also [wielded](#)<sup>3</sup> enough political power to influence elections, control entire industries, and even change policy.

[00:00:46] I am talking, of course, about the Five Families of New York - the city's Italian-American criminal [underworld](#)<sup>4</sup>.

[00:00:54] There is a lot to talk about so we are going to split this into two parts.

[00:00:58] Today's episode will look at the early years, the [infighting](#)<sup>5</sup>, and the modernisation of the Italian-American mafia.

[00:01:06] In part-two, we'll look at the business of the Five Families, their cultural significance, and their [downfall](#)<sup>6</sup>.

[00:01:14] OK then, let's get into it and talk about The Five Families and the business of crime.

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<sup>1</sup> got money by force or threats

<sup>2</sup> frightened, caused fear

<sup>3</sup> held, had

<sup>4</sup> world of criminals or organised crime

<sup>5</sup> fighting between people that belong to the same group

<sup>6</sup> loss of power

[00:01:24] On the afternoon of the 15th of April, 1931, an armoured car pulled up outside the Nuova Villa Tammaro restaurant in Coney Island, New York.

[00:01:36] Two [bodyguards](#)<sup>7</sup> got out, and then a third smaller, [chubbier](#)<sup>8</sup> man followed.

[00:01:42] His name was Giuseppe Masseria.

[00:01:46] He made his way to a table at the back of the restaurant, where a man was already waiting.

[00:01:53] The restaurant was quiet that afternoon. There was nobody else around.

[00:01:59] Masseria sat down at the table and ordered some bread, wine and coffee, but this man, Giuseppe Masseria, was no ordinary customer.

[00:02:11] He was known all over New York City as "Joe the Boss" Masseria. He was the head of the Genovese crime family.

[00:02:20] And the man waiting at the table was one of his [lieutenants](#)<sup>9</sup>, a man called Charles 'Lucky Luciano'.

[00:02:29] Their food arrived, and the restaurant's owner quietly told his staff to stay in the kitchen, and that he was 'going for a walk.'

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<sup>7</sup> people whose job was to protect someone from attack

<sup>8</sup> fatter, plumper

<sup>9</sup> assistants, deputies

[00:02:39] A while later at around 3pm, as Joe the Boss played an after-lunch game of cards, Luciano excused himself and went to the bathroom.

[00:02:50] "I gotta [take a leak](#)<sup>10</sup>".

[00:02:52] Then, a group of men came up behind Masseria and shot him several times in the back, and once in the head.

[00:03:02] His body flopped forward onto the table, and then fell onto the floor.

[00:03:08] The men left behind their guns, hats, and coats and jumped into a [getaway car](#)<sup>11</sup>, with [tyres](#)<sup>12</sup> [screeching](#)<sup>13</sup> on the road.

[00:03:18] Joe the Boss was dead.

[00:03:20] A pool of blood leaked across the restaurant floor.

[00:03:24] In Masseria's bloodied hand was the Ace of Spades - the death card.

[00:03:32] Though it's likely that one of the gunmen [planted](#)<sup>14</sup>, or put, the card there to make some kind of point, or send a message, some believe that Masseria was holding the death card at the very moment he was killed.

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<sup>10</sup> urinate, pee

<sup>11</sup> a car used to carry the criminals away from the crime scene

<sup>12</sup> thick rubber rings around the wheels of the car

<sup>13</sup> making a long, high noise

<sup>14</sup> put

[00:03:46] Nobody was ever [convicted](#)<sup>15</sup> of the murder, and there were, of course, no witnesses.

[00:03:53] But in those days, back in 1931, murders like this had become normal.

[00:04:01] “Joe The Boss” was just another statistic, another [hit](#)<sup>16</sup>, as [wise guys](#)<sup>17</sup> say, in an ongoing war.

[00:04:09] Dozens of these murders, of these very public executions, had been going on across New York during a bloody war between competing [factions](#)<sup>18</sup> of the city's Italian criminal [underworld](#).

[00:04:24] But Masseria's death was also significant for another reason.

[00:04:30] Lucky Luciano, the young man sitting with him at the table that afternoon, his former [lieutenant](#)<sup>19</sup> that [excused](#)<sup>20</sup> himself to go to the bathroom, had [betrayed](#)<sup>21</sup> his boss and organised the [hit](#).

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<sup>15</sup> having been found guilty, sentenced

<sup>16</sup> murder

<sup>17</sup> people who are trying to seem clever in an annoying way

<sup>18</sup> groups

<sup>19</sup> second in command, assistant

<sup>20</sup> allowed

<sup>21</sup> was not loyal or faithful

[00:04:44] And this [treacherous](#)<sup>22</sup> young man had big plans.

[00:04:49] He wanted to end the war and create the [framework](#)<sup>23</sup> for a professional criminal empire, an empire that would be called The Five Families of New York.

[00:05:01] Now, before we get into all the [wise guys](#) and gangsters getting '[whacked](#)<sup>24</sup>', as they say, meaning killed, let's start with a little historical context.

[00:05:11] For this, we need to travel back across the Atlantic Ocean not just to Italy, but to a very specific part of Italy: Sicily.

[00:05:22] Now, in case you don't know where it is, Sicily is an island in the Mediterranean Sea. If you think of Italy like a foot kicking a football, Sicily is the football.

[00:05:33] And Sicily is where it all began.

[00:05:36] Due to its strategic location between Africa and Europe, over the years Sicily had been invaded by the French, the Romans, the Spanish, the Arabs and even the Phoenicians.

[00:05:49] And in order to defend against whoever was the invader of the day, the local population had for hundreds of years organised themselves into groups to defend their land.

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<sup>22</sup> not able to be trusted, deceitful

<sup>23</sup> basis, conditions

<sup>24</sup> killed

[00:06:01] By the 19th century these small gangs had become known as 'mafie', and they charged landowners money in return for 'protection' - it was a very common mafia method of making money, as we will see in New York a little bit later in the episode.

[00:06:20] As a quick side note, this word, "mafia", is believed by historians to come from a [colloquial](#)<sup>25</sup>, an informal, Sicilian-Arabic phrase that roughly means 'acting as a protector against the [arrogance](#)<sup>26</sup> of the powerful.'

[00:06:37] Over the decades these groups grew in strength and size, [exerting](#)<sup>27</sup> more and more influence on the island, and after Sicily became part of Italy in 1861 these groups even cooperated with the government to keep other, rival groups [in check](#)<sup>28</sup>, under control.

[00:06:57] In return, the authorities [turned a blind eye](#)<sup>29</sup>, they ignored the Sicilian mafia's own criminal activities, which were quite extensive by this point.

[00:07:08] The government had [intended](#)<sup>30</sup> for these sorts of deals to be short-term fixes for the instability threatening the country, but as the 19th century progressed, the

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<sup>25</sup> informal

<sup>26</sup> the belief that they were better than other people

<sup>27</sup> applying, exercising

<sup>28</sup> under control

<sup>29</sup> acted as if they didn't know

<sup>30</sup> planned



Sicilian mafia began using its muscle, or power, to influence politics, business and even the Catholic church.

[00:07:27] So, by the late 19th century, the mafia was [a force to be reckoned with<sup>31</sup>](#).

[00:07:33] This period also [coincided<sup>32</sup>](#) with a period of mass emigration from Italy, in particular Sicily, across the Atlantic to the United States.

[00:07:44] From the 1880s to the 1920s, over 20 million immigrants arrived in the United States looking for their [slice<sup>33</sup>](#) of the American dream. A large [chunk<sup>34</sup>](#) of these were Italians.

[00:07:57] In the 1890s, 600,000 Italians came to the United States and by 1920 over 4 million had come.

[00:08:07] Lots of Italians came from southern Italy - places like Napoli, Calabria, and Campania.

[00:08:13] And of course, from Sicily.

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<sup>31</sup> very powerful

<sup>32</sup> happened at the same time

<sup>33</sup> piece

<sup>34</sup> number, part

[00:08:16] Many of them [settled](#)<sup>35</sup> in the Mulberry area of Manhattan, and the neighbourhood was home to so many Italians that it quickly became known as 'Little Italy.'

[00:08:27] The Italians arriving in New York at [the turn of](#)<sup>36</sup> the twentieth-century generally stayed together, ate Italian food, spoke Italian, and lived together.

[00:08:38] They were, [by and large](#)<sup>37</sup>, treated by the local population as second-class citizens, only able to get low-level, manual jobs.

[00:08:47] But America was the land of opportunity, and there were plenty of [enterprising](#)<sup>38</sup> young men who [sensed](#)<sup>39</sup> new possibilities, even if those possibilities were highly illegal.

[00:09:00] And this criminality is believed to have started in a fairly unorganised, [petty](#)<sup>40</sup> way, far from the tightly-controlled criminal empire that Lucky Luciano would [preside over](#)<sup>41</sup> several decades later.

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<sup>35</sup> came to stay

<sup>36</sup> at the point when the previous century ended and the next began

<sup>37</sup> mostly, on the whole

<sup>38</sup> good at finding ways to make money

<sup>39</sup> noticed, recognised

<sup>40</sup> not significant, minor

<sup>41</sup> be in charge of, lead

[00:09:14] At the beginning, there were various loosely connected Italian gangs constantly [warring](#)<sup>42</sup> with Irish and Jewish gangs but also with one another.

[00:09:25] Historians believe that the first of these was the Morello gang, a group of Sicilian criminals that operated in the Harlem neighbourhood of New York around [the turn of](#) the 20th century.

[00:09:37] They made their money mainly by making [counterfeit](#)<sup>43</sup> currency - that is, making fake money - and also in construction.

[00:09:47] They also owned grocery stores and restaurants, and made money by [intimidating](#)<sup>44</sup> their rivals out of business or demanding protection money from them, as their [forefathers](#)<sup>45</sup> had done back in Sicily decades before.

[00:10:00] The Morello gang was led by Giuseppe Morello, a Sicilian known as the 'Clutch'<sup>46</sup> hand' because of his [deformed](#)<sup>47</sup>, one-fingered hand that rivals said looked like a [claw](#)<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> fighting, being at war

<sup>43</sup> fake

<sup>44</sup> making them be afraid

<sup>45</sup> members of past generations of relatives

<sup>46</sup> grasping or holding tight

<sup>47</sup> not having normal form or shape

<sup>48</sup> curved or bent nail of at the end of the toes of an animal

[00:10:13] In the early-1900s, Morello **teamed up**<sup>49</sup> with another Sicilian, Ignazio ‘the Wolf’ Lupo, and the two began **asserting**<sup>50</sup> their **dominance**<sup>51</sup> in New York by murdering their opponents.

[00:10:26] Morello quickly rose to power, and by 1902 he had **established**<sup>52</sup> himself as the leader of the Sicilians in New York when he **allegedly**<sup>53</sup> ordered the murder of a Brooklyn rival called Giuseppe Catania, who, Morello felt, “talked too much when he was drunk.”

[00:10:44] Catania’s body was later found **stuffed**<sup>54</sup> into a **barrel**<sup>55</sup>, which was a method of **disposal**<sup>56</sup> that the Morello gang would become known for.

[00:10:53] By 1905, Morello was generally thought to be capo de tutti capi, or ‘boss of all bosses’, but in 1910 he was **convicted** of **counterfeiting**<sup>57</sup>, of creating fake money, and sentenced to 25 years in prison.

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<sup>49</sup> joined

<sup>50</sup> causing others to recognise it and respect them

<sup>51</sup> quality of being important and successful

<sup>52</sup> been accepted and respected

<sup>53</sup> supposedly, according to what people say

<sup>54</sup> put

<sup>55</sup> a round container

<sup>56</sup> getting rid of the bodies

<sup>57</sup> creating fake money

[00:11:09] This gang, the Morello gang, created the early model of the Italian-American mafia and it is generally thought to be the first Italian-American mafia family.

[00:11:21] But they were far from having a monopoly on the New York criminal [underworld](#).

[00:11:27] They were constantly [jostling for power](#)<sup>58</sup> with other organised criminal gangs, often with origins in other areas of southern Italy, namely Naples and Calabria, regions with their own organised criminal systems - the Camorra, in Naples, and the 'Ndrangheta, in Calabria.

[00:11:44] And throughout the 1920s they [warred](#)<sup>59</sup> with each other, [betrayed](#) one another, and many even switched sides.

[00:11:53] By the late 1920s, [things were coming to a head](#)<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> competing or fighting with each other for power

<sup>59</sup> fought

<sup>60</sup> things became very bad



[00:11:58] The [Prohibition](#)<sup>61</sup> Era, which had started in 1920, had been great for business, as the alcohol trade was strictly controlled by criminals. But it had also cost a lot of lives, as organised criminals [vied](#)<sup>62</sup> for control of [bootlegged](#)<sup>63</sup> alcohol.

[00:12:15] There were many [disparate](#)<sup>64</sup>, separate groups, all fighting one another.

[00:12:20] So how did these different groups of disorganised murderers and criminals end up in a highly-regulated organisation with [hierarchies](#)<sup>65</sup> and rules?

[00:12:31] Well, as with most things that concern the mafia, it all started with war, a war that would become known as the Castellammarese War.

[00:12:40] In fact, we've already heard a bit about the Castellammarese War.

[00:12:45] We certainly heard how it ended in the introduction to this episode, with the execution of Joe The Boss.

[00:12:54] This war, which lasted from February in 1930 to April of 1931, is viewed by most as the beginning of the New York [mob](#)<sup>66</sup> as we know it, transforming it from a

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<sup>61</sup> a period in American history when the sale, production, and transportation of alcoholic drinks was made illegal

<sup>62</sup> competed, fought

<sup>63</sup> illegally made

<sup>64</sup> separate

<sup>65</sup> systems in which members were ranked according to importance or authority.

<sup>66</sup> mafia

group of divided, [warring](#) criminal [factions](#) into an organised crime [syndicate](#)<sup>67</sup> run like a business.

[00:13:15] By 1930, the Italian [underworld](#) in New York had two main [factions](#) - both of which were Sicilian.

[00:13:23] One group was led by “Joe the Boss” Masseria, who largely kept his gang to other Sicilians and southern Italians.

[00:13:31] This group was called the Masseria faction.

[00:13:35] The other group was called the Maranzano faction, and was led by a man called Salvatore Maranzano, who was himself being advised by another powerful figure called Don Vito Ferro who was [pulling the strings](#)<sup>68</sup> from back in Sicily.

[00:13:51] So, what was this war all about?

[00:13:54] Well, [on the surface of it](#)<sup>69</sup>, it was about money and power, like most wars.

[00:14:00] Maranzano declared war on Masseria, there was [bloodshed](#)<sup>70</sup> as [bullets](#)<sup>71</sup> flew through the streets of New York.

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<sup>67</sup> group of organisations working together

<sup>68</sup> Controlling them

<sup>69</sup> supposedly, seemingly

<sup>70</sup> killing and violence

<sup>71</sup> the small, metal objects that are shot from a gun

[00:14:09] But beneath the surface it was about [competing](#)<sup>72</sup> visions of what the mafia should be.

[00:14:16] These visions weren't split by region or by [faction](#)<sup>73</sup>, but tended to be split down generational lines, it was a case of the younger versus the older generation.

[00:14:29] By 1930 many mafia members in New York were born in, or at least grew up in, the United States, and they wanted to modernise and change the business.

[00:14:41] They were American, [born and bred](#)<sup>74</sup>.

[00:14:45] The other half, referred to by the younger generation as 'Moustache Petes', were born and raised in Italy, and cared more about tradition and the Sicilian way of doing things, preferring to not do business with Americans, if they could.

[00:15:03] This generational divide was so deep that it led to one man [betraying](#)<sup>75</sup> his boss to try to get his way.

[00:15:12] This man was, as you may remember, Charles "Lucky" Luciano.

[00:15:17] Sure, Luciano might not have been born in New York, he was born in Sicily, but his family emigrated to the US when he was 8.

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<sup>72</sup> fighting against one another

<sup>73</sup> group

<sup>74</sup> they were born and grew up there

<sup>75</sup> not being loyal or faithful

[00:15:27] He was Italian by birth and by blood, but he had an American vision of the future.

[00:15:34] So, what did he do? He [betrayed](#) his boss, Masseria, and secretly [negotiated](#)<sup>76</sup> with Maranzano.

[00:15:43] His boss, Masseria, was a “moustache Pete”, and Luciano believed that even if his side won the war, Masseria’s old-fashioned values would get in the way of growing the business.

[00:15:58] Luciano’s proposal to Maranzano was simple.

[00:16:02] Let me kill Masseria, and take his place at the top. I will then make peace, and the war will stop.

[00:16:12] And this takes us to the Coney Island restaurant we heard about at the start of the episode.

[00:16:19] Masseria was [out of the picture](#)<sup>77</sup>.

[00:16:22] And it wouldn’t be long in fact before Lucky Luciano gave Maranzano the same treatment, continuing his [treacherous](#) ways and having him killed a few months later.

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<sup>76</sup> tried to reach an agreement

<sup>77</sup> no longer involved in the situation

[00:16:34] With both Masseria and Maranzano [out of the picture](#), Luciano called a meeting of crime bosses from across the country and organised what he called “The Commission”.

[00:16:47] The Commission put the top crime families from around the United States into a single organisation, known as La Cosa Nostra, which was run less like a gang but more like a business with a board and a chairman.

[00:17:03] At the meeting, a national crime [framework](#) was agreed that [incorporated](#)<sup>78</sup> the New York families plus Al Capone's Chicago family and Italian-American [mobsters](#)<sup>79</sup> from Buffalo, upstate New York.

[00:17:18] As New York dominated the criminal [underworld](#), the meeting also formally established New York's Five Families.

[00:17:27] They were then known as the Luciano, Bonanno, Profaci, Mangano, and Gagliano crime families.

[00:17:36] [The stage was set](#)<sup>80</sup> for these Five Families to [extract](#)<sup>81</sup> literally billions of dollars from the American economy, controlling everything from construction to prostitution to gambling to politics.

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<sup>78</sup> included

<sup>79</sup> members of the mafia

<sup>80</sup> the conditions were right

<sup>81</sup> remove, take out



[00:17:49] Luciano might not have known it at the time, but he had just created very possibly the most successful criminal enterprise in history.

[00:18:01] Ok then, that is it for today's episode on the history and creation of the Five Families of New York.

[00:18:08] As a reminder, this episode is going to be followed by another one where we go deep into the actual business of the Five Families, look at how they made their money, and why it wasn't to last.

[00:18:19] As always, I would love to know what you thought about this episode.

[00:18:22] Why do you think stories about the American mafia are so alluring?

[00:18:27] For the Italians among you, how do you feel about this global obsession with the Italian-American mafia?

[00:18:34] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started.

[00:18:37] You can head right into our community forum, which is at [community.leonardoenglish.com](http://community.leonardoenglish.com) and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:18:45] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:18:50] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

## Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Extorted	got money by force or threats
Intimidated	frightened, caused fear
Wielded	held, had
Underworld	world of criminals or organised crime
Infighting	fighting between people that belong to the same group
Downfall	loss of power
Bodyguards	people whose job was to protect someone from attack
Chubbier	fatter, plumper
Lieutenants	assistants, deputies
Take a leak	urinate, pee
Getaway car	a car used to carry the criminals away from the crime scene
Tyres	thick rubber rings around the wheels of the car

Screeching	making a long, high noise
Planted	put
Convicted	having been found guilty, sentenced
Hit	murder
Wise guys	people who are trying to seem clever in an annoying way
Factions	groups
Lieutenant	second in command, assistant
Excused	allowed
Betrayed	was not loyal or faithful
Treacherous	not able to be trusted, deceitful
Framework	basis, conditions
Whacked	killed
Colloquial	informal
Arrogance	the belief that they were better than other people
Exerting	applying, exercising

<b>In check</b>	under control
<b>Turned a blind eye</b>	acted as if they didn't know
<b>Intended</b>	planned
<b>A force to be reckoned with</b>	very powerful
<b>Coincided</b>	happened at the same time
<b>Slice</b>	piece
<b>Chunk</b>	number, part
<b>Settled</b>	came to stay
<b>The turn of</b>	at the point when the previous century ended and the next began
<b>By and large</b>	mostly, on the whole
<b>Enterprising</b>	good at finding ways to make money
<b>Sensed</b>	noticed, recognised
<b>Petty</b>	not significant, minor
<b>Preside over</b>	be in charge of, lead
<b>Warring</b>	fighting, being at war

<b>Counterfeit</b>	fake
<b>Intimidating</b>	making them be afraid
<b>Forefathers</b>	members of past generations of relatives
<b>Clutch</b>	grasping or holding tight
<b>Deformed</b>	not having normal form or shape
<b>Claw</b>	curved or bent nail of at the end of the toes of an animal
<b>Teamed up</b>	joined
<b>Asserting</b>	causing others to recognise it and respect them
<b>Dominance</b>	quality of being important and successful
<b>Established</b>	been accepted and respected
<b>Allegedly</b>	supposedly, according to what people say
<b>Stuffed</b>	put
<b>Barrel</b>	a round container
<b>Disposal</b>	getting rid of the bodies
<b>Counterfeiting</b>	creating fake money



**Jostling for power** competing or fighting with each other for power

**Warred** fought

**Things were coming to a head** things became very bad

**Prohibition** a period in American history when the sale, production, and transportation of alcoholic drinks was made illegal

**Vied** competed, fought

**Bootlegged** illegally made

**Disparate** separate

**Hierarchies** systems in which members were ranked according to importance or authority.

**Mob** mafia

**Syndicate** group of organisations working together

**Pulling the strings** controlling them

**On the surface of it** supposedly, seemingly

**Bloodshed** killing and violence

**Bullets** the small, metal objects that are shot from a gun

**Competing** fighting against one another

**Faction** group

**Born and bred** they were born and grew up there

**Betraying** not being loyal or faithful

**Negotiated** tried to reach an agreement

**Out of the picture** no longer involved in the situation

**Incorporated** included

**Mobsters** members of the mafia

**The stage was set** the conditions were right

**Extract** remove, take out

*We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.*

*What did you like? What could we do better?*

*What did you struggle to understand?*

*Let us know in the forum [community.leonardoenglish.com](https://community.leonardoenglish.com)*