

1879

World premiere of **Henrik Ibsen's** *A Doll's House* at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark.



1883

The Royal Canadian Dragoons and The Royal Canadian Regiment, the first Permanent Force cavalry and infantry regiments of the Canadian Army, are formed.

1907

The **Chilean** Army commits a massacre of at least 2,000 striking saltpeterminers in Iquique, Chile.

1910

An underground explosion at the Hulton Bank Colliery No. 3 Pit in Over Hulton, Westhoughton, England, kills 344 miners.

Will El Chapo's trial change organised crime forever?

The code of Omertà has been broken



ROBERTO SAVIANO

In opening arguments at the trial of Joaquín Guzmán, known as El Chapo, Assistant United States Attorney Adam Fels told the jury that the shipments seized from Guzmán's cartel by American authorities amounted to "more than a line of cocaine for every single person in the United States" — an image that conveys the power of this \$14 billion drug boss.

The prosecutors were hoping for a long sentence for Guzmán, one of the most powerful organised-crime figures in the world. On Feb 12, they got it: He was found guilty on 10 charges. He is likely to spend the rest of his life in prison.

The evidence introduced by the prosecution and the testimony of the 56 witnesses during the three-month trial brought to light a range of details about the life and crimes of the accused: the salacious, such as the cell-phone spyware Guzmán used to control his men and, especially, his lovers; the macabre, such as the man from a rival cartel whom he had buried alive; the politically compromising, such as the \$100 million bribe his former right-hand man (turned informant) said was paid to Enrique Peña Nieto, then Mexico's president-elect, to allow Guzmán to remain in hiding undisturbed.

But it is neither the trial's revelations nor its central figure's stature that makes it a turning point in the history of drug trafficking and organised crime. What this trial has, in my view, revolutionised forever is the relationship between criminal groups and what we call in Italian pentiti — "penitent ones," or cooperating witnesses.

I have been reporting on organised crime in Italy and around the world, including Mexico, for decades. In my time, I have observed some clear rules. One of those is that cooperating witnesses have been seen by criminal organisations as unforgivable traitors.

In every mafia, from Naples to Sinaloa, omertà, the code of silence, has been essential to keeping the organisation's business and structure intact. It is also the standard by which an associate's reliability and honour are measured. No one ever imagined gaining criminal respect by snitching. Betrayal has always been punishable by death — of the informant, of the informant's family. Salvatore (Totò) Riina, head of the Cosa Nostra in Sicily, famously ordered the killing of all pentiti and their descendants unto the seventh generation. One of the Cosa Nos-



Joaquín Guzmán (El Chapo), the notorious drug trafficker, after his recapture in Mexico in 2016.

tra's most barbarous acts was the 1996 murder of Giuseppe Di Matteo: kidnapped when he was 12, held prisoner for 18 months, then strangled and dissolved in acid, because his father had become a state's witness and was revealing information about the assassination of a judge.

Killing an informant's family has the dual function of punishing the traitor and warning his associates what will happen if they follow his example. This practice was also popular in Mexican drug cartels. One example among many: In 2008, twin brothers Margarito and Pedro Flores, major distributors for the Sinaloa cartel in the United States, began co-operating with American authorities. The next year, their father was kidnapped in Mexico. His body was never found, but a message at the site of the abduction confirmed that he had been taken because his children were snitches.

By the same token, if any relative of a boss — even an in-law or a distant cousin — becomes an informant, it has typically left an indelible stain on the boss's criminal reputation, enough to end his career and heap shame on his family.

But Guzmán's trial signals a momentous change: Members of the organisation can now collaborate with law enforcement without provoking punishments or consequences for their family members.

Two of the trial's key witnesses were Jesús Zambada García and Vicente Zambada Niebla, the brother and the son of Guzmán's longtime partner, Ismael Zambada García, better known as El Mayo. The Sinaloa cartel was effectively a diarchy ruled by Ismael Zambada and Guzmán until the latter's arrest; now Ismael Zambada is in charge.

Mexican drug lords have realised that the co-operation of their own people with American law enforcement can be considered a legitimate choice, not only for the personal benefits it can bring.

Even as his brother and his son cooperate with American authorities, revealing details of traffic and income and law enforcement corruption, Ismael Zambada continues to run the cartel. Neither he nor his family has suffered reprisals.

How is this possible? Simple: Mexican drug lords have realised that the cooperation of their own people with American law enforcement can be considered a legitimate choice, not only for the personal benefits it can bring — such as sentence reductions or family protections — but also because if handled well, it won't destroy the organisation. Indeed, in some cases, cooperating with the authorities can help to protect the cartel's assets and even give an advantage to one boss or another.

This strategy seems to be behind the collaboration of Ismael Zambada's relatives with the American authorities. In particular, the testimony of Vicente Zambada, which many saw as a betrayal of his father, could instead be an act of extreme loyalty to him.

My reporting on the recent history of Mexican drug trafficking has led me to believe that

Ismael Zambada may have had a hand in Guzmán's capture. According to this theory, Ismael Zambada, accustomed to acting in the shadows and tired of the spotlight on his partner, which could eventually have brought ruin to the cartel, betrayed Guzmán and facilitated his arrest. (Guzmán's lawyers tried to exploit this theory during the trial, portraying their client as a scapegoat.) In this light, even the younger Zambada's testimony during the trial can be seen as part of a plan secretly orchestrated by his father.

Vicente Zambada's testimony, which was crucial in the case against Guzmán, may simply be the price the elder Zambada must pay to ensure that Guzmán is locked away in an American prison, thousands of miles from Sinaloa. The information provided by Vicente Zambada will not destroy the cartel's business, and it may well contribute to a change at the top that benefits his father. Cooperating witnesses are vital tools in the fight against cartels, but the danger now is that drug lords have learned how, while revealing some truths, to maintain their organisations' power.

This new tactic is unlikely to be limited to Guzmán's trial. It touches on one of the fundamental rules of mafias the world over, that of omertà, to which occasional exceptions are not allowed. You can't allow one snitch to go unpunished and then return to normal enforcement. Either snitches are always punished or, if they are not, the rules have been changed. If the world's largest drug cartel were to begin tolerating snitching, it would lose all credibility in the eyes of associates and rivals — it would be chaos. That the son of a Sinaloa cartel boss has turned

state's witness, leaving both his father's power and the cartel's strength intact, means that a new rule has been born.

In my experience reporting on organised crime, I've learned that changes to basic rules are never made by a single boss. They must be made jointly by the leaders of his own and other organisations.

Had Ismael Zambada, the cartel's new boss, made this decision independently, other clans — or even his own associates — would have been ready to use his son's cooperation to remove him from power. Such things have happened in the past, in Italy: Carmelo Novella, one of the heads of the northern Italian branch of the 'Ndrangheta (the Calabrian mafia), was killed in 2008 for planning to operate more independently without seeking, as the 'Ndrangheta code required, the permission of other organisation bosses. Ismael Zambada has gone unpunished for violating the rules. I won't be surprised if other cartels follow his example.

Vicente Zambada's sentencing is expected in a few weeks. Because of his cooperation, he will get a reduced term and a guarantee of protection for his family. His father will gain full control of the cartel without having to worry about Guzmán, who will be locked away for life in an American prison cell, to the delight of the United States prosecutors. After all, their goal in this trial was to ensure that the drug trafficker Joaquín Guzmán was brought to justice. The irony is that the most powerful Sinaloa drug lords who are not in prison shared that goal.

(Roberto Saviano is the author of "Gomorra," a book about the Neapolitan mafia, and "ZeroZeroZero," about the global cocaine trade.)

TOP
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TWEETS

01



"We're investing in new space capabilities to project military power and safeguard our Nation's interests, especially when it comes to safety and defense."

@WhiteHouse

02



Prime Minister Narendra Modi: "I welcome #SaudiArabia's participation in #India's growth and rising infrastructure. You have a great vision for 2030... The time has come to make this region among those leading across the world. #Vision2030 #Crown-PrinceinIndia"

@CICSAudi

03



After today's #At-tukalPongala, @gwr will have to issue a revised certificate. Estimates I've heard range from 3.5 million to nearly 4 million worshippers today (in a city whose normal population is 1 million). Congratulations Thiruvananthapuram on handling the influx so well!

@ShashiTharoor

04



By coordinating our diplomatic efforts, France and India show once again unity against terrorism

@FranceinIndia

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