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Cast of Characters

Amato, Det. Mike:
York Regional Police organized crime expert

Bonanno crime family:
New York City Mob family with long-standing Montreal influence

Brisebois, Normand:
Former Montreal biker and Rizzuto crime family enforcer

Cammalleri, Leonardo:
Father-in-law of Montreal Mafia boss Vito Rizzuto

Caruana, Alfonso:
Drug kingpin in Woodbridge, Ont.

Charbonneau, France:
Superior Court justice, head of Montreal commission probing corruption in construction industry

Cotroni, Frank (The Big Guy):
Younger brother of former Montreal Mob boss Vincenzo (The Egg) Cotroni

Cotroni, Vincenzo (Vic, The Egg):
Former crime family boss in Montreal with ties to New York’s Bonanno family

Cuntrella, Agostino:
Longtime Rizzuto crime family loyalist

Desjardins, Raynald:
Murder target and murder suspect, connected to Rizzuto family
DiMaulo, Giuseppe (Joe):
Brother of convicted killer Jimmy DiMaulo and a major Mob player. Murdered in his home in Blainville, Que., on Nov. 5, 2012.

DiMaulo, Vincenzo (Jimmy):
Convicted killer and golf enthusiast

Fernandez, Juan Ramon:
Thrice-deported Vito Rizzuto loyalist. Lived in Greater Toronto Area under names “James Gordon Shaddock,” “Johnny Bravo” and “Joe Bravo.”

Indelicato, Alphonse (Sonny Red):
Bonanno family member and Vito Rizzuto victim, killed alongside Philip “Philly Lucky” Giaconne and Dominick “Big Trinny” Trinchera

Lo Presti, Giuseppe (Joe):
Rizzuto in-law and Mob diplomat

Luppino, Giacomo (Don Giacomo):
Early Mob don in Hamilton, Ont., whose wallet allegedly contained a human ear

Manno, Antonino (Don Nino):
Father-in-law of Nicolò Rizzuto and major Mafia power in Sicily

Massino, Joe (The Boss):
Bonanno crime boss turned rat

Mirarchi, Vittorio (Victor):
Montreal café owner and murder suspect with Toronto-area friends

Montagna, Salvatore (The Bambino Boss):
Ill-fated head of Bonanno crime family
**Nicaso, Antonio:**
Organized crime expert from York Region

**Pagano, Oreste:**
Toronto-area Mob malcontent

**Panepinto, Gaetano (The Discount Casket Guy):**
Cut-rate coffin shop owner in Toronto area and murder victim

**Papalia, John (Pops):**
Hamilton Mob boss on wrong end of Rizzuto crime family expansion into Ontario

**Pistone, Joseph:**
Ex-FBI undercover agent and Mob target better known as “Donnie Brasco”

**Renda, Paolo:**
Vito Rizzuto’s brother-in-law, Rizzuto family consigliere

**Rizzuto, Nicolò (Uncle Nick):**
Father of Vito Rizzuto and longtime Montreal Mob boss, shot dead at his Montreal home in 2010

**Rizzuto, Nicolò (Nick Jr.):**
Vito Rizzuto’s eldest son and heir apparent, gunned down in Montreal in 2009

**Rizzuto, Vito (V, Stringbean, The Old Guy):**
Embattled Montreal mobster with major Toronto ties, released from prison in late 2012

**Sciascia, Gerlando (George From Canada):**
Montreal mobster involved in Brooklyn triple murder with Vito Rizzuto

**Stalteri, Cosimo:**
Toronto-area mobster wanted by Italian police for murder of toy vendor in Italy
**Violi, Paolo:**
Former Hamilton and Toronto-area resident and bitter rival of Nicolò (Uncle Nick) Rizzuto

**Zambito, Lino:**
One-time construction mogul who shocked Charbonneau commission with accounts of corruption in Montreal’s building industry
Introduction

There was a time when my ambition was to be a sportswriter, in the tradition of Milt Dunnell and Red Smith. I’m not exactly sure how I drifted over to the world of organized crime.

Warren Moon deserves some of the blame. The Hall of Fame quarterback kept me waiting almost an hour for an interview back in the early 1980s, then didn’t deign to apologize or explain when he abruptly called it off. Until that time, I saw him as a supremely gifted athlete. Perhaps I even suffered from hero worship. Since then, it’s been hard not to think of him in a less flattering light.

I drifted a little further away from my sports-writing ambition the day I wrote about a perky but uncoordinated adolescent gymnast. I wasn’t sure how to describe her performance honestly without hurting her feelings or giving her false hope. She was clearly having fun. I remember using the word “enthusiastic” in my account of her efforts.

There are no such qualms when chronicling the Mob. Feeling guilty isn’t a problem when you’re writing about people who leave fellow humans stuffed in the trunks of Cadillacs, or in ditches.

I started looking at organized crime in the late 1980s, after I wrote a book on former Seafarers Union head Hal Banks. I was curious to know if Banks was connected to the Montreal Mob, and I did considerable research into possible links. I concluded that there was no connection. Banks was simply a major thug in his own right.

During that research, a retired Montreal police officer told me I should be writing about the Cotroni crime family. I looked into them and agreed they were worthy of investigation. That’s when I first heard of Vito Rizzuto and his father, Nicolò. I did interviews and searched archives in Canada and the U.S. I also went to
Marseille and Sicily to research heroin routes.

One of my strongest memories is of taking a cab to the mountain town of Corleone, Sicily, the namesake of the family in the *Godfather* movies. I was staying at the four-star Grand Hotel et Des Palmes in Palermo. (I chose it because a major meeting had been held there in 1957 to restructure the world heroin trade.) After returning from the trip to Corleone, I turned on the TV to unwind and got a jolt when *The Untouchables* appeared on the screen. Just then, there was a knock on the door and the driver appeared with my wallet, which I had left in his cab. In it was about $500. He said words to the effect of “We’re not all Mafia here,” and refused to accept any reward.

Since then, I’ve come to know others whom I respect greatly and whose lives are spent either monitoring or fighting organized crime. Some of the police I won’t mention because I don’t want to get them in trouble. A current topic of debate in their circles is whether wilful ignorance should be considered corruption. Antonio Nicaso, a Toronto expert on organized crime, became my friend more than 20 years ago and my respect for him has only grown in the years since. We wrote a book together in 1993; since then, a half-dozen of the figures we wrote about, including Johnny (Pops) Papalia of Hamilton, have been murdered.

I’ve also come to know some of the criminals, to a point. Some are surprisingly polite. Some aren’t. Pat Musitano of Hamilton once said, “Thank God your mother loves you because no one else does.” Then he got really insulting. Carmen Barillaro wanted me to visit him at his Niagara Falls roadhouse. I was tipped off that his plans were to take me into the basement and pound me senseless. He was murdered before this could be accomplished.

There was also a time, years and years ago, when I thought of teaching history. What bothered me about researching conventional history is that many of the best topics have already been
thoroughly mined. How many more books does the world need on Churchill? Organized crime provides a historical topic that’s relatively fresh and undoubtedly important. There’s a chance to do primary research and talk with actual participants.

All this helps explain how I ended up sitting in a car with a Toronto Star photographer in York Region in early October 2012, watching for Vito Rizzuto to reappear immediately after his release from a U.S. prison, where he served time for his role in three contract killings. We were outside a wealthy compound, a place where Vito has often stayed while in the Toronto area, and we were immediately picked up by a security camera. A man with a Rottweiler came out and photographed us and our licence plates.

Then a woman in a plush track suit — not unlike the one Warren Moon wore decades before — strode up to the car. She told us we weren’t welcome on her street. We stifled the temptation to say criminals shouldn’t be welcome in our province. “It isn’t right,” she said, and then marched away in a huff. I wondered if she felt any irony about her comment.

She was far ruder than Moon, but this time it didn’t bother me. This time, there were no illusions to be shattered.
“He’s an excellent player.”
Veteran police officer describes Vito Rizzuto’s golf game

There’s a joke that everyone in Vito Rizzuto’s world wants to play golf with him but no one wants to beat him. That’s certainly understandable. Who would risk upsetting the most powerful member of the Canadian Mafia? And even if someone genuinely tried to upstage Vito on the links, it wouldn’t be easy.

Vito isn’t the first Canadian Mafia member to love sports. Back in the 1970s, former Toronto resident Paolo Violi sponsored kids in neighbourhood bicycle races, as befitted his stature as the proprietor of a popular Montreal ice cream parlour. Frank (The Big Guy) Cotroni of the Montreal Mob could often be found ringside at boxing matches, close to the spray of sweat and the blood as fighters such as the Hilton brothers and Toronto’s Eddie (The Hurricane) Melo tenderized the competition.

At first glance, the genteel game of golf might seem incongruous for Vito, a mobster with international reach, from Sicily to Colombia, Mexico to Brooklyn. Golf’s gentle rhythms, subtle strategies and strict decorum may seem an unlikely fit for someone who just served prison time for his role in three gangland hits. On closer examination, however, golf makes perfect sense.

It’s a game that offers strategic challenges, socializing, exclusivity and order — all things that appeal to Vito. To golf well, a player must stay relaxed while facing a myriad of challenges and decisions. Small wonder that golf has been a favourite of the business-minded Japanese yakuza organized crime network for decades. There are no sudden victories as in boxing or mixed martial arts, sports loved by Vito’s associates in the Hells Angels. You can’t run out the
clock in golf. Victory on the links requires staying power until the very last shot — something Vito learned from his father, a power in the Canadian Mob until a bullet stopped him in his 87th year.

Golf also allows a player to assess the decision-making skills of others in his midst. A player like Vito can learn much about a man’s mind merely by watching how he balances risk-taking with caution as he repeatedly whacks a little white ball up and down manicured lawns over the course of an afternoon.

Although Vito’s considerable fortune was amassed illicitly, he clearly finds no disconnect between the jungle law of the underworld and the well-established etiquette of the fairways. At his favourite courses, including those in and around Toronto, scions of society far outnumber ex-cons such as Vito. At such courses, Canada’s top mobster happily abides by the rules. All members and guests, including Vito, are forbidden from wearing denim, leaving their shirts untucked, wearing sandals in the clubhouse or pointing the brims of their caps any direction but forward.

Fairways and clubhouses provide Vito with a chance to mingle with people other than the knuckle-dragging, tattooed, Hummer-driving sorts one associates with street-level organized crime. Vito’s moneyed golfing buddies in the Greater Toronto Area include a York Region homebuilder who often gives him a place to stay. The builder lives in a family compound with a steel security gate and a top-end security camera that helps keep away unwanted intruders. Vito is presumably comfortable in such a place. He might work with the Quebec arm of the Hells Angels while cutting multimillion-dollar cocaine deals, but he looks every inch a CEO.

Vito is so at home in exclusive country clubs that it’s possible he doesn’t even think of himself as a real criminal anymore. Indeed, the ongoing Charbonneau commission, which is probing corruption in Quebec’s construction industry, heard one witness say that Vito is a major force in determining where roads are built in the province.
According to Lino Zambito, a former construction mogul who took the commission’s witness stand this fall, Vito stood far above others in the organized crime landscape when it came to construction graft. Vito didn’t steal public funds at the point of a gun. Instead, he imposed a 2.5-per-cent tax on the building industry itself with all the confidence of a legitimate governing body, the commission heard. He allowed his golfing buddies access to the trough as well. Zambito testified that retired Montreal city engineer Gilles Surprenant, who golfed and dined with Vito in the Dominican Republic, was nicknamed “TPS” (Taxe Pour Suprenant) because of his personal cut of 1 per cent from bid-rigged contracts.

So, to say Vito is a criminal is an accurate but incomplete description of what he does for a living. Vito and his father, Nicolò, became wealthy by finding common ground among criminals, business people, politicians and bureaucrats. One of Vito’s rare public comments was made to former Journal de Montréal crime reporter Michel Auger. “I’m a mediator,” Vito told him.

Before 2004, Vito could scarcely control his passion for golf. He loved it so much that he once estimated, during the trial of one of his associates, that he golfed about 100 times a year, often in charity events. Vito is keeping a low profile now, since his arrival in Toronto on Oct. 5, 2012, after his release from an American prison for his role in three gangland murders. Small wonder he’s keeping his head down, since his father, eldest son and several trusted associates were all murdered during his absence.

Plenty of people on both sides of the law are curious about Vito’s current whereabouts. There have been reported sightings of him in Montreal in an armour-plated luxury car, but no one outside his close circle of confidants appears to know exactly where he’s sleeping and spending his days. A police officer who’s very familiar with him says that if someone were looking to find the Mob boss, a good place to start would be some of the best golf club restaurants
in Toronto or Montreal. It’s too cold for golfing now, but clubhouses still offer a certain sanctuary, as members-only policies cut the risk of surprise visits by police, street thugs or reporters.

Vito’s golfing stopped abruptly on the morning of Jan. 20, 2004, with a knock on the door of his neo-Tudor mansion in Montreal. It was shortly after 6 a.m. and Vito was asleep when the uninvited visitors arrived. He had been up late the night before, as was his habit, sipping wine and blurring the lines between business and pleasure.

Vito descended his grand staircase in a white dressing gown, appearing more annoyed than shocked. He alluded to an unsolved gangland triple murder in Brooklyn in 1981 as he faced the officers.

“Is it for that thing in New York?” Vito reportedly asked.
Vito Rizzuto, a lover of golf, led a comfortable life in Montreal before his U.S. conviction.
If Vito Rizzuto carries himself like someone to the manor born, it’s because this is true, in an underworld sense. His maternal grandfather was Sicilian Mafia clan chief Antonino (Don Nino) Manno. He was a man of considerable power in the early 20th century around the dusty medieval town of Cattolica Eraclea in Agrigento province, about 80 kilometres south of Palermo. Don Nino provided Vito’s father, Nicolò, with work as a campiere, a paid guardian for estates of absentee landlords, when Nicolò was in his late teens. A campiere in those days had a certain amount of power, deciding which day labourers would be granted work and which would leave the town square empty-handed.

Don Nino was impressed enough with Nicolò to allow him to marry his daughter Libertina. They were well set by the standards of rural Sicily, but wanted far more. Their arrival in Canada offered the promise of more than guarding someone else’s wealth. Nicolò stepped onto Pier 21 in Halifax on his son Vito’s eighth birthday: Feb. 21, 1954. He was 29 and Libertina was 27. Vito’s sister, Maria, was 7 years old. Their family circle expanded a decade later with Don Nino Manno’s arrival in Montreal. Not long after that, Vito’s future father-in-law, Leonardo Cammalleri, fled Sicily for York Region, ahead of carabinieri who sought to arrest him for murder. Manno and Cammalleri kept low profiles in their new country, enjoying relative anonymity from the public and respect from underworld peers.

Vito was the same age as his father – 20 – when he married. His bride, Giovanna Cammalleri, was 18. In the world of Don Nino
and Leonardo Cammalleri, marriages were arranged as strategically as those in the royal courts of Renaissance Europe. Matches were formed with an eye to power, politics and diplomacy. Vito and Giovanna were from separate but compatible crime groups, and their union promised strength and advancement as well as companionship. Vito’s new father-in-law, Leonardo, was a man with connections and clout. He had been convicted in absentia in Sicily of the 1955 murder of Giuseppe Spagnolo, a leftist politician whose push for social reform had drawn the ire of landowners. Cammalleri avoided punishment by fleeing with the help of a priest and living for the next half-century in the Toronto area. The man who implicated Cammalleri in the murder also moved to Canada. No one was ever brought to trial after that man was murdered in Montreal.

As with a Renaissance wedding, guests were invited to Vito’s nuptials for strategic as well as social reasons. Attending the service that day was Paolo Violi, a fast-rising member of the Cotroni family of Montreal. The Cotronis represented the Canadian arm of the Bonanno crime family of New York. They coveted Montreal because its port was ideal for heroin smuggling, while its wide-open downtown offered pleasant diversions for family members hiding from American authorities. Within a decade of Vito’s wedding, Violi and Nicolò Rizzuto would be murderous rivals, but on Vito and Giovanna’s wedding day, things were still cordial between the two families.

Paolo Violi already understood what it meant to benefit from marriage. His father-in-law was Giacomo Luppino, a don in Hamilton, Ont., who sat on the camera di controllo, or governing body, of the Ontario Calabrian Mafia, known as the ’Ndrangheta. Don Giacomo might appear unremarkable to those who didn’t know him. Much of his time was passed discussing rather ordinary things. In the 1960s, a police microphone hidden in the tomato
patch outside his two-storey home in Hamilton’s east end captured him talking about the hockey injuries of Eddie (The Entertainer) Shack. He also amused himself by mocking television gangster shows. But those who knew him better appreciated that there was much more to Don Giacomo than these innocent pastimes. A widely circulated story was that he carried the shrivelled ear of an old rival in his wallet, the way a matador cherishes the ear of a prized bull.

Paolo Violi outside his ice cream shop in Montreal

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Nicolò and Vito Rizzuto quietly rose in the Montreal-based crime family of Vic (The Egg) Cotroni. The Egg was born in the southern Italian province of Calabria and his crime family included both Calabrian and Sicilian members. Old-world tensions meant this was a difficult and sometimes explosive mix. The Egg was the Bonannos’ branch plant manager and no one challenged his authority more than Nicolò Rizzuto and his only son, Vito.
Vito Rizzuto: Canada’s Country Club Mobster

Nicolò routinely ignored meetings called by The Egg and his Calabrian underboss, Paolo Violi. Violi suspected Nicolò was withholding a cut from his heroin trafficking network. It was also clear that Violi and Nicolò would one day be rivals for the top job in the Cotroni empire, when it came time to replace The Egg.

A hidden police recording device in Violi’s ice cream shop captured Cotroni’s voice as he discussed how he might handle the problem of Nicolò Rizzuto. “Me, I’m capodecina (head of the Montreal group). I got the right to expel.”

On another occasion, a police bug caught Violi discussing the extremely secretive nature of his rival, Nicolò: “I told him he goes from one thing to the other, here and there, and says nothing to nobody. He does things and nobody knows nothing.”

There are no human resource departments or pink slips in the Mafia, but there is plenty of buckshot. A half-dozen years after he attended Vito’s wedding, Violi sought permission from the crime family’s American bosses to have Nicolò Rizzuto killed. Mob protocol meant that the top level of the Bonanno family in New York
had to approve Nicolò's murder. The Americans declined and Nicolò slipped away to Caracas, Venezuela, where he connected with a Corsican drug trafficking ring. He also became active in the local construction industry, ran a nightclub called Il Padrone and plotted his eventual return to Montreal.

By 1977, there were whispers that Nicolò Rizzuto had slipped back into Montreal. On Feb. 8 that year, at least two gunmen opened fire on Violi’s brother Francesco in his office at Violi Importing and Distributing Co. Ltd. in an industrial section of Montreal. Francesco was the most dangerous of the Violi brothers and a logical first target in any campaign against the family. There were rumours that Paolo was next on the hit list, but he refused to leave the city. On Jan. 22, 1978, Paolo was invited for a game of cards at his old ice cream shop, now in the hands of a Sicilian
associate. Not long after he sat down to play, a man reportedly leaned forward and gave him a traditional \textit{bacio della morte} — kiss of death — on the cheek. An instant later, a masked gunman shot him twice point-blank in the back of the head, ending his life at age 46.

The Rizzuto era in the Canadian underworld had begun.

Through it all, Vito thrived in the background, for a time managing the Cheetah Club on Beaubien St. E. in Montreal. His eldest son, Nicolò (Nick) Jr., followed his father, working in construction and the Mob. As Vito raised his family, he had plenty of money for amusement, as his crime family was strengthening its interests in drug smuggling, loansharking, gambling and money laundering. He displayed a love of attractive women, haute cuisine and luxury automobiles, including Mercedes, Corvettes and a Ferrari that was a gift. The richer he grew, the more presents he received, as others attempted to win his favour. Through it all, he appeared supremely confident, like a great golfer strutting down a fairway in a championship round.

On Nov. 16, 1980, American federal investigators reported that Vito was at the Hotel Pierre in Manhattan as a wedding guest of Giuseppe Bono, considered by authorities to be a senior member of the Ciaculli Mafia family of Palermo. The groom was seen as a middleman in heroin smuggling between European and North American crime groups. Also there from Montreal was Giuseppe (Joe) Lo Presti, who was related to Rizzuto by marriage. Lo Presti owned a Montreal construction firm and acted as a diplomat of sorts between the New York and Montreal mobs. Another wedding guest was Cesare (Tall Guy) Bonventre, an occasional visitor to the Toronto area. His dismembered body would appear four years later in barrels in a warehouse in Garfield, N.J.
Intelligence officers monitoring the Bono wedding also noted senior members of the American DeCavalcante and Gambino crime families. There were five major families in New York City and dozens of others across the United States. They alternately joined forces with each other and battled for turf, depending on business opportunities and mood swings. Vito was now moving in the top levels of traditional organized crime, without pushing his father to the side.

There was no doubt that Nicolò and Vito were a team. Their few differences were mostly generational ones concerning style. Nicolò sported a fedora in public while Vito preferred to go hatless, his swept-back hair always perfectly in place. One writer said his coiffure appeared to be cast from iron. Another difference between father and son was in how they relaxed. Nicolò loved to play cards in a backroom of the tired-looking Cosenza Social Club on Jarry St. E. in Montreal, set between a tanning salon and a cheese shop. Vito chose to unwind on the fairways and in the dining rooms of high-end golf courses.

Giuseppe (Joe) DiMaulo, once a close associate of Vito Rizzuto, was murdered outside his home in November 2012.
Vito Rizzuto: Canada’s Country Club Mobster

Vito told the 1995 drug trafficking trial of one of his associates that some of his friends had memberships at more than one club. Those golfing buddies included Vincenzo (Jimmy) DiMaulo, who served time in the late 1960s and 1970s for murder. DiMaulo’s brother Giuseppe (Joe) DiMaulo was considered a key player in boosting the Rizzutos in their bloody rise over the rival Violi faction of the Montreal Mob.

“He is a member at several places, I think,” Rizzuto told the court, speaking about Jimmy DiMaulo. Given the limited season for golf in Canada, Vito and his friends were on the course almost constantly through the summer before heading south to places such as Casa de Campo in the Dominican Republic. He declined to tell the court that his golf pals also included municipal officials responsible for administering multimillion-dollar construction contracts.

“I have played 100 times a year,” Vito testified.
Oreste Pagano’s 60th birthday on July 15, 1998, wasn’t anything to celebrate. He was extradited that day from Mexico to Toronto as an undesirable, then immediately arrested on drug trafficking charges along with senior members of a Sicilian Mafia group living in York Region and known to police as the Cuntrera-Caruana crime family. Vito and Nicolò Rizzuto had worked with the Cuntrera-Caruanas for decades in North and South America and Europe; Vito and Pagano had brushed up against each other in their travels.

Pagano belonged to the Camorra, an ancient criminal society that grew out of the streets and jails of Naples. His base was Venezuela and his role was that of an intermediary between the Sicilian Mafia and Colombian drug suppliers. Together, they generated tens of millions of dollars, but Pagano always felt apart from the Sicilians, like a peasant wearing a gold Rolex. Now, as he languished in the Toronto East Detention Centre, Pagano had plenty of time to reflect on real and perceived snubs from the group, especially from Alfonso Caruana of Woodbridge. Caruana told Revenue Canada he was a simple car-wash attendant, but to Pagano he came across as a snob who thought he was too good to talk with him. Tension had been building inside Pagano for some time, culminating the day he decided he could take it no longer and took the irreversible step of calling police. He wanted to talk.

Several recorded conversations followed in Sudbury and Toronto-area hotel rooms, as Pagano told police how the Cuntrera-Caruanas smuggled cocaine out of Venezuela in tar barrels. He laughed nervously as he spoke about how his own world was about
to change forever. “I have many enemies that want to kill me. They would like to cut me up to little pieces … I need security for me and my children.”

The conversation shifted to Vito, whom Pagano considered a good enough guy in a very rough business. Pagano reminded police that they still hadn’t managed to make a case stick against him. There is no official title for a grand don — or capo di tutti capi — in the Canadian underworld. If there had been such a title, it would have been held by Vito, as Pagano explained: “Vito Rizzuto is the head of the Mafia in Canada … Friends of mine who are in the Mafia, they told me that Vito Rizzuto is the head of the Mafia in Canada.”

In a Markham hotel on Nov. 18, 1999, police videotaped Pagano as he spoke about how the drug traffickers benefited from corruption in Venezuela and widespread naiveté in Canada.

“Venezuela has always been a precious country because of politics,” Pagano said. “It’s a very corrupt country.” As Pagano talked, Canadian police and prosecutors were moving against the Cuntrera-Caruanas in one of Ontario’s few successful cases against the Mafia. Pagano said the group was a major force in international drug trafficking, but not at its pinnacle: “The one who is really leading everything in Canada is Vito Rizzuto.”

Vito’s name still wasn’t well known to the Ontario public in March 2001, when a three-day meeting of organized crime specialists was held in a 10th-floor boardroom near the Rogers Centre, then called the SkyDome. The only people invited were an elite group of trusted experts on traditional organized crime — police code for the Mafia. They included select intelligence officers from Hamilton, Peel and York police, as well as the Ontario Provincial Police, the RCMP, the Joint Services Casino Intelligence Unit and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. In the opening pages of a report circulated among those participants was
the bald sentence “Traditional Organized Crime (TOC) continues to flourish in this province.”

By this time, Vito had become something of a national policing priority. A report delivered to the federal justice minister and solicitor general in February 1996 noted that investigators suspected half the Italian buffets in Montreal sold smuggled alcohol, and that Vito was the key force in selling it. The federal report also noted that one of Vito’s relatives was close to a Montreal city councillor and that a local mayor regularly golfed with a Mafioso. There was also speculation in the report that Vito had somehow become involved with the gold fortune of former Filipino president Ferdinand Marcos, and that Vito had been in Switzerland with some $40 million of the precious metal.

The report also noted that Canadian authorities had failed to make charges stick when Vito was accused of trying to smuggle shipments of 30, 32 and 50 tonnes of hashish, and another lucrative caper involving 5,000 kilos of cocaine. While Vito walked free from these cases, those around him weren’t so fortunate. One case against Vito collapsed when a key witness became afraid of testifying. The federal report was stamped “SECRET.” The section on Vito was titled “Portrait du Parrain,” or “Portrait of the Godfather.”

That 2001 meeting of organized-crime specialists underlined the extent of Vito’s influence in Ontario. It noted the sweep of traditional organized crime, from street crime such as drugs, prostitution and murder to ostensibly legitimate, mainstream enterprises. As examples, it cited cheese distributors, environmental waste firms and a popular downtown Toronto restaurant.

The report circulated at the meeting also noted that traditional organized crime had now reached its third generation in the Greater Toronto Area. It cited the presence of Cosimo Stalteri, who would die of natural causes in February 2011 at the age of 86. Despite strong police suspicion about him, Stalteri lived for 49
years in Canada without one criminal conviction. He also escaped deportation, although he was sought by Italian authorities for the 1973 killing of an Italian street vendor in a dispute over the sale of a toy.

The report described a power shift within Ontario, with Montreal-based Sicilian mobsters expanding their interests across provincial boundaries. A section titled “A Changing of the Guard” warned of the power of Vito Rizzuto and his working relationship with outlaw motorcycle clubs in drug trafficking.

Such an expansion would not go unopposed. The report cited the 1997 murders of Johnny (Pops) Papalia of Hamilton and his Niagara Falls lieutenant, Carmen Barillaro. Both men were considered to be in the anti-Rizzuto camp. Papalia had long-standing ties to the Buffalo Mob, which was in sad decline. It didn’t help Papalia that there were suspicions he had scammed a Rizzuto associate out of millions. The report also noted the October 2000 murder of Gaetano (The Discount Casket Guy) Panepinto, a
Rizzuto loyalist in the Toronto area who ran a chain of cut-rate coffin shops and a west-end gym. The report didn’t note that Panepinto’s workout buddies included an OPP officer.

As evidence of the underworld power shift, the report noted a meeting in a Woodbridge restaurant on Nov. 22, 1997, that was attended by Vito Rizzuto, Panepinto and a dozen others. The report spoke of Vito’s efforts to pull together Toronto-area members of the ’Ndrangheta and outlaw motorcycle clubs. It also said a man to watch was Juan Ramon Fernandez, a thrice-deported weightlifting enthusiast and convicted killer, who had served prison time for beating a teenage stripper to death. Fernandez had lived in the Toronto area illegally under the names “James Gordon Shaddock,” “Johnny Bravo” and “Joe Bravo.” Also noted in the same document was the fact that one of Vito’s “respectable” associates had recently moved from Montreal to Toronto. He had purchased a luxury mansion while working the stock market and in various businesses.
To make this complex system of relationships easier to understand, the intelligence officers at the meeting were given a chart resembling something you might see in a high school chemistry class. It attempted to explain connections between outlaw motorcycle clubs, the Irish mob of Montreal, aboriginal gangs, eastern European organized crime, the Bonanno crime family of New York and the mobs of Greater Toronto, Hamilton and the Niagara region, as well as western Canadian organized criminals. The complex diagram resembled a spider’s web, and at its centre were the words “Rizzuto Group, Vito Rizzuto Head.”
Free fall

“I seen Vito shooting. I don’t know who he hit.”
Mobster Salvatore (Good-Looking Sal) Vitale

Vito Rizzuto built a neo-Tudor mansion on a strip of land on Antoine Berthelet Ave. in Montreal’s exclusive Cartierville area. Next door was the new and equally impressive home of his father, Nicolò, while Vito’s brother-in-law Paolo Renda lived in a mansion another door over. Rounding out this enclave was Giuseppe (Joe) Lo Presti, who spent much of his time on family drug business in New York City. The houses were all built in the early 1980s and spoke of confidence, wealth and clannishness. There was no fence around any of the properties on what the press dubbed “Mafia Row,” and the houses are fully visible from the street. What was the need for a fence or hedge or gate at this time? The Violis had been vanquished, with the family’s widows and children driven back to Hamilton. Who else would dare to attack Nicolò and Vito?
If Vito felt untouchable, it was understandable. The last charges against him that stuck were back in 1972, when he served a few months for attempting to burn down a barber shop in a clumsy insurance scam that almost roasted Vito himself. Since then, he had grown much more efficient, beating major drug smuggling charges in 1987, 1988 and 1990. Now, Vito lived the high life as friends and associates routinely chose time in prison over witness protection.

Vito could often be seen in restaurants and nightclubs, sharing a table with a chosen few. Many of the fine bottles of wine that arrived at the table of Canada’s “Teflon Don” were gratis, as the whiff of business opportunities drove outwardly legitimate people to pick up tabs for him. A particularly ambitious Montreal construction mogul comped a weeklong golfing vacation at a top-level Dominican resort.

That all changed the day the police officers showed up at Vito’s door on Jan. 20, 2004. There was speculation that his glory days were over when he was extradited to New York in 2006 for trial, after an intense and costly legal battle to stay in Canada. Things looked grim as he was charged with “racketeering conspiracy, including the murders of Indelicato, Giaconne and Trinchera,” according to the U.S. extradition documents.

Vito had traded his snugly tailored suits and golfing togs for a rough orange jumpsuit. His cell was roughly the size of his walk-in closet at home. His haircuts were now jagged and unflattering. He shared jail space with men who bore names such as “Patty Muscles,” “Mickey Boots,” “Petey Boxcars” and “Bobby Ha Ha.” They were all allegedly part of the Bonanno crime family in New York and were accused of misdeeds that ranged from fixing baccarat games to murder.

The American racketeering indictment called Vito the Bonanno crime family’s “most influential” Canadian figure. Once revered
in the underworld for a lack of informers, the Bonannos were increasingly known as a motley collection of rats, all eager to sell each other out for leniency with the courts. There were jokes that the Bonannos had more members in witness protection than they did on the streets, and the tabloids ran headlines such as “Unpeeled Bonannos” and “Bonanno Split.”

One family turncoat was Salvatore (Good-Looking Sal) Vitale, the former right-hand man of Bonanno leader Joe (The Boss) Massino. Vitale told court that he, Vito and another man were hiding in a closet at a Brooklyn social club on May 5, 1981, when Bonanno capos Alphonse (Sonny Red) Indelicato, Philip (Philly Lucky) Giaconne and Dominick (Big Trinny) Trinchera arrived for an “administrative meeting” that included Massino and others in the Bonanno clan. It was suspected that the three capos were plotting to overthrow Massino, and so The Boss planned a pre-emptive strike. The closeted mobsters had their faces concealed with ski masks. In their hands were loaded pistols.

Gerlando (George From Canada) Sciascia was to run his hands through his silver coiffure as the signal for the men to come out. “We entered the closet and left the door open a smidge so we could look out,” Vitale said.

Good-Looking Sal reported that Vito was the first gunman out of the closet. “I heard Vito (Rizzuto) say, ‘Don’t anybody move. This is a holdup,’” Vitale recalled. “Then shots were fired. I seen Vito shooting. I don’t know who he hit. I saw Joe Massino punching Philly Lucky.

“I froze for five seconds … and Frank Lino (a wise guy with the rival faction) passed us and kept on running. The only one who was standing in the room with the three dead bodies was Joe Massino. Everyone was gone. We looked at each other like, ‘Where did everybody go?’”

When Vito took the stand to testify in his own defence, he
painted things differently but they still didn’t look good: “I did participate,” he said. “… My job was to say it was a holdup, so everybody would stay still. Other guys came in and started shooting the other guys.”

When the trial wrapped up, Vito was convicted of racketeering and sentenced to 5½ years in addition to time already served. The lesser conviction meant that he served less than two years of prison time for each victim in the indictment.

Still, time in custody isn’t pleasant for anyone, let alone someone like Vito. It must have grated that he and his fellow Canadians had kept their silence for decades, yet he was in prison nonetheless. Vito was behind bars because of a decided lack of omertà in the Bonanno head office.

There was also unsettling news from Italy. Officials there were moving to prosecute Vito for a scam involving a $6-billion bid to build a bridge connecting Sicily and the mainland. But soon, the prison time and looming Italian court case would be the least of his problems. For Vito, the worst was only beginning.
The New York tabloids dubbed Salvatore Montagna “The Bambino Boss” when he became head of the Bonanno crime family at the age of 35. Others called him “Sal the Ironworker” and “The Man of Steel” for his interests in the construction industry. Whatever the name, the challenges facing him were formidable. The former boss, Joe (The Last Godfather) Massino, had turned informer to avoid a death sentence after he was convicted of racketeering and seven murders.

A man in his mid-30s wouldn’t be considered a bambino in many other crime groups — Jamaican posses, say, or Vietnamese street gangs. But it was relatively young for the Mob world, in which a septuagenarian fish seller was still a force in Greater Toronto.

Montagna was adaptable and hungry. He was born in Montreal and spent much of his youth in Sicily with dual Italian-Canadian citizenship. The father of three daughters, he settled into a relatively modest ranch house in Elmont, Long Island, a far cry from the marble-lined Rizzuto mansions of Montreal.

Not long after his promotion to top Bonanno, American authorities began an attempt to deport Montagna to Canada. He had refused to answer questions before a Manhattan grand jury, making him guilty of criminal contempt. Montagna retreated to Quebec. Because he left of his own accord in 2009, he could apply to get back into the U.S. within a year. In the meantime, Montreal and Toronto offered tempting opportunities.

The Montreal underworld was in disarray. Vito was in prison and police were wrapping up a massive five-year operation against
his family. It was dubbed “Project Colisée,” a reference to the crumbling ruins of Rome. The RCMP had gathered thousands of hours of recordings from the grungy Cosenza Social Club, using it to take down 73 alleged members of the crime family — including Vito’s father, Nicolò — in November 2009.

Vito’s imprisonment already meant that the Rizzutos had lost their boss. Colisée peeled away the next couple of levels. Nicolò was facing charges of tax evasion, possessing goods obtained through criminal gains and possession of proceeds of crime for the benefit of a criminal organization. Out on bail, he was no longer as spry as he was in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when he first gained his grip on Montreal’s underworld.

Montagna quietly settled in Île Vaudry, a working-class neighbourhood on a small island about 50 kilometres north of Montreal. This kept him off the police and media radar. His wife and kids paid him visits. So did his mistress, who was carrying $60,000 in cash on one trip when she was pulled over by police.

Nicolò Rizzuto was free on bail when Montagna sat down with him in 2009. It quickly became clear that the aging mobster was not eager for his family to step down from the leadership of the Bonanno Canadian subsidiary. Nicolò had built up the family and he would safeguard it until Vito walked out of prison. This was a daunting challenge for a man of any age, as many of the family’s toughest members were behind bars. Among those off the streets was Francesco Arcadi, who had spent much time in Woodbridge, near Toronto, visiting Mob hangouts including a members-only sports bar just off Hwy. 7. Also sidelined was Lorenzo (Skunk) Giordano, who was particularly feared after shooting a smart-mouthed Russian mobster in the testicles.

Montagna wasn’t the only one who saw opportunity in the
Rizzutos’ weakness. For the Toronto members of the Calabrian Mafia, Vito’s absence offered the promise of a return to the glory days of the 1960s and ’70s, when Calabrians and not Sicilians held the balance of power in Canada’s traditional organized crime.

Some of these Toronto-area ’Ndrangheta members had got along with Vito. Certainly he knew how to generate money. Still there was the hope of doing even better with Montagna, who began travelling to Toronto and meeting with local top ’Ndrangheta members in 2009. Their decision to join the ranks of the anti-Vito movement was mostly business, not personal.

The Rizzuto family was caught in a global pinch against the Sicilian Mafia. Waves of crackdowns that began in Italy and New York in the 1980s continued in the following decades, destabilizing Vito’s network of contacts. The ’Ndrangheta quickly filled the power vacuum, especially in Greater Toronto, building tight ties to burgeoning Mexican drug cartels.

Soon, Montagna was meeting in the Toronto area with members of the ’Ndrangheta camera di controllo. Notable at these meetings was the absence of Sicilians who were close to the Rizzutos.

In the fall of 2009, there had been talk of a meeting at the Vaughan Mills shopping mall with Toronto-area residents and a representative of the Commisso crime family, which had considerable clout in York Region and in Calabria.

On Dec. 28, 2009, Vito’s eldest son, Nick Jr., 42, was shot to death in broad daylight near his black Mercedes in Montreal. Nick Jr. bore a striking resemblance to his father, with the same swept-back hair, aquiline nose and hawkish countenance.

Vito had sent Nick Jr. to private school, where he had eventually been expelled for violent behaviour. He had some success in the condo construction industry, and there was talk that he had tried
to squeeze a fellow builder for money owed to him. The murder was never solved, leaving unanswered questions about whether the money squeeze had anything to do with the hit. Nick Jr. was never a major money-earning force in the family, but he was a Rizzuto nonetheless and it was assumed he would have plenty of time to develop. It was doubtful anyone would have tried such a move if Vito were still on the streets.

“This is like a tsunami for the underworld,” said Antonio Nicaso, an organized crime expert from York Region. “This is the weakest time ever for the Rizzuto crime family (and an) unprecedented challenge to the Rizzuto family.” Nicaso noted that Vito’s feelings of loss must be close to unimaginable. “They killed the first in line, the successor of Vito Rizzuto. Nobody before challenged the authority of Rizzuto. And so, by killing family … this is personal … This is something that requires retaliation.”

Things stayed personal in May 2010, when Paolo Renda, Vito’s 70-year-old brother-in-law, vanished. Renda had been the family consigliere, or adviser. After his arrest in the Operation Colisée crackdown of 2006, he was identified as a money man in the organization, third in power behind Vito and Nicolò Sr. He pleaded guilty to gangsterism charges and had recently been paroled after serving two-thirds of a six-year prison term. Renda lived with his wife, Vito’s sister Maria, on the same street as Vito.

Renda’s disappearance remains unsolved. The keys were still in the ignition of his Infiniti and four prime steaks he had just purchased were left on a seat. It seemed clear he had pulled his car to the curb to chat with someone. He wasn’t the type of man who stopped for strangers, making it easy to assume he was tricked by someone he trusted.

Renda’s abduction moved Agostino Cuntrera, a longtime family loyalist, up in the family’s power structure. Cuntrera had proven his reliability when he served five years for conspiracy to
commit murder in the plot to kill Paolo Violi back in 1978. He knew enough about the Mob to realize he was a major target now, but police reminded him anyway. The 66-year-old responded by stockpiling weapons, purchasing an armoured car from north of Toronto and travelling close to a bodyguard.

Even those precautions weren’t enough. On June 30, 2010, Cuntrera was shot dead in broad daylight in front of his wholesale business in the Saint-Léonard district of Montreal. Also killed was his bodyguard, Liborio Sciascia.

There was talk that Cuntrera’s life ended because he refused to make good on drug debts owed by another member of the family. Under the rules of his society, he was not responsible for someone else’s debts, but that may not have satisfied the men who were owed money. It was easy to wonder if Mexican drug cartels, bikers and fellow mobsters were giving the Rizzutos the same respect they had when Vito was on the streets. Without Vito around, his associates were all potential targets.

Vito must have had a premonition of what would happen next, but there wasn’t a thing he could do to stop it. He was still in prison 3,100 kilometres away in Florence, Colo., in November 2010 when news reached him of the bullet fired into the home of his father, Nicolò. The sniper fired from the woods behind Nicolò’s unfenced property, out of sight of several security cameras and close to a statue of the Virgin Mary. Nicolò Rizzuto dropped dead in his kitchen in front of his wife of 65 years, Libertina. At the time of his death, the acting head of the country’s top crime family was an 86-year-old great-grandfather with respiratory problems aggravated by stress.

Killing someone in front of his family is always bad form, even for the Mafia. “That’s so disrespectful,” said Nicaso. “It is really the meanest way to kill a mobster.” Normand Brisebois, a former Rizzuto enforcer, said in an interview with the Toronto Star that
Nicolò hadn’t been spending much time on the streets in those last few weeks of his life, realizing that he was in danger. “I think they (Rizzuto’s enemies) had no choice,” Brisebois said. “He was not going out at all. He was always in the house.”

It was painfully obvious that Vito was no longer able to guard his empire or defend those he loved. He couldn’t even attend their funerals. Once the most powerful man in Canadian organized crime, he could only sit in a faraway prison in another country and look utterly helpless.

Vito Rizzuto at a wedding, before his U.S. jail sentence
Rat Revolt

“I’m completely rehabilitated.”
Raynald Desjardins, longtime associate of Vito Rizzuto

The gunman wasn’t able to get a clear shot at Raynald Desjardins, but he squeezed the trigger several times anyway. Desjardins had once been known as Vito Rizzuto’s right-hand man. By September 2011, it was hard to know where he stood with the crime family. Desjardins didn’t clarify much for police after he was designated an “important witness” in the attempt on his life outside his Laval home.

There had been rumblings that Desjardins and his brother-in-law Giuseppe (Joe) DiMaulo, a Calabrian who moved in top Montreal Mob circles, had become close to Rizzuto rival Salvatore Montagna. It may not have been anything personal against Vito. Business is business, even when bodies begin to stack up.

As Desjardins would have it, he wasn’t involved in anything criminal after his release from prison in 2004. He had served 10 years of a 15-year sentence for a plot to import 740 kilograms of cocaine from Venezuela. He announced that he had found a new occupation and a new outlook on life. Now, Desjardins would make his living as a “construction entrepreneur.” Building things was his new passion, he told La Presse in 2009: “At 55, it’s over for me, the crime. I’m completely rehabilitated … For five years, my whole life revolves around my new business. My children work with me. This is the good life.”

The attempted hit on Desjardins came at a sensitive time for Quebec’s provincial government. Pressure was mounting for a public inquiry into corruption in the construction industry. A confidential government-appointed investigation had already
been leaked to the media and it pointed to far-reaching collusion among politicians, the construction industry, civil servants and organized crime. Embarrassing media reports highlighted Desjardins’ cosy relations with construction union heads and developers. Some commentators noted that he somehow managed to get a jogging track built for inmates while he was in prison.

Montagna was also no stranger to construction corruption. Soon after his arrival in Quebec, he was suspected of shaking down a number of Montreal-area construction companies for 5 per cent of their profits. He also reportedly leaned on at least one major non-construction business that was associated with the old guard of the Montreal Mafia.

Whoever went after Montagna in Île Vaudry in November 2011 had better aim than Desjardins’ would-be assassin. Montagna was hit with gunfire but able to jump into the frigid Assomption River and make it to the other shore before collapsing. He was pronounced dead in hospital at age 40.

In late December 2011, police announced the arrests of five men for Montagna’s murder. The accused included Desjardins, who was charged with first-degree murder, and Vittorio (Victor) Mirarchi, a Montreal café owner who was well acquainted with Toronto-area Calabrian mobsters, including owners of a popular Yorkville eatery and a Woodbridge bakery-café.

There were plenty of questions begging for answers: Could Vito possibly have the clout to defend his family from prison? Why hadn’t Montagna tried to get back into the U.S.? Were the Bonannos too weak now to play any role in the Canadian bloodletting?

There was also talk that the conspiracy against Vito had come unglued. Turncoats seemed to be turning on each other, while Vito’s family was bloodied but still standing. Talk of their slaughter wasn’t so loud now. Increasing in volume were predictions of revenge.
“There would no longer be a need for bribes, payoffs and the like; middlemen would be eliminated.”
Letter to editor of Montreal Gazette

Quebec Superior Court Justice France Charbonneau is a rare being in Montreal public life: a civil servant who commands high respect from the public and has a reputation for fearlessness with organized crime. In her time as a prosecutor working with the province’s elite anti-biker squad in the late 1990s, Charbonneau managed to put Hells Angels leader Maurice (Mom) Boucher in prison for first-degree murder. In October 2011, she was given a task that seemed equally daunting: head a commission probing how the Mafia and outlaw biker gangs have infiltrated Quebec’s $50-billion construction industry.


Now 73, Pistone had spent more than a quarter-century with a murder contract on his head. He told the inquiry that the players may have changed but the Mafia’s methods remain the same. It still uses murder and intimidation to corrupt businesses and government officials. His face shielded by a black screen, Pistone said it’s a dangerous mistake to believe that the crime organization is bound by rules of honour. “You have to get across to the public that this is not an honourable society, that there is no honour among thieves,”
Pistone advised the commission. “Even though you may not think it, any product that the Mafia has its hand in, the public ultimately pays for it … This is not the movies and this is not the way these guys really are. This is real life. They are a dangerous plague on society.”

He told of how a “club” of the five Mafia families of New York had controlled construction projects in the city during his undercover days. This control came through ownership of companies, infiltration of unions and supply of building materials. Whatever the method, Mafia involvement means higher costs to taxpaying public. “The government and taxpayers are paying more when the Mafia is involved in any particular business.”

None of this would be possible without corruption: “They corrupt public officials. They corrupt businessmen. They corrupt politicians,” he said. “Without that corruption, they really cannot operate.”

Former Montreal construction mogul Lino Zambito kept the corruption theme alive when he described a tidy system that benefited construction firms, union bosses, politicians and bureaucrats. As Zambito explained things, only select companies could bid for lucrative public contracts on jobs such as excavation and sewer work. All bids were unnecessarily high and it was determined in advance which firm would submit the lowest bid. To keep everyone in the trough, they agreed to take turns winning bids. This gave the appearance of fierce competition but all the outcomes were fixed: a publicly financed version of professional wrestling.

Collecting illegal taxes to keep the system running were politicians, bureaucrats and the Rizzuto organization, as Zambito described it. There were plenty of criminal organizations in Montreal but only Vito’s group was accused in the construction scams. Zambito accused the mayor’s political party, Union Montréal, of collecting kickbacks of 3 per cent on all construction
Vito Rizzuto: Canada’s Country Club Mobster

in his city. Another 1 per cent went to a city engineer, while Vito’s organization collected 2.5 per cent and an assortment of bureaucrats also took their cuts, he said.

“If you didn’t follow the rules, you didn’t work in Montreal,” Zambito testified. “You can go work elsewhere.”

Montreal Mayor Gérald Tremblay quickly and strongly denied the allegations that his party benefited from kickbacks but he didn’t refute allegations that construction corruption was rife. “That rumour of the 3 per cent has been going on for a while, and as a result of that I verified, I asked my official agent to verify and I was assured that there was no illegal financing going on of my party,” Tremblay told the press. He also attacked the RCMP for doing nothing with the Project Colisée surveillance video that captured a parade of construction bosses making regular trips into the Cosenza Social Club to see the Rizzutos.

The stench of corruption only grew stronger when retired city engineer Gilles Surprenant told the commission that a contractor picked up the tab when he and a fellow civil servant golfed with Vito in the Dominican Republic in the late 1990s. Surprenant insisted that he didn’t talk business while holidaying with the Mafia don. He added that he also golfed in 2002 with Vito, another city engineer and a developer in Terrebonne, outside Montreal, at the ultra-exclusive golf club Le Mirage, owned by musical superstar Céline Dion.

No one had to cheat to help Vito win on the course that day. “I remember very well that on the final hole, Mr. Rizzuto made a putt of about 75 feet to win the round,” Surprenant recalled. “Then, after that, we had to pay him the bet that we had made,” he recalled, saying the mobster collected on a $25 wager for his skills.

It wasn’t a total loss for the city engineer, as a developer picked up the tab for dinner and drinks with Rizzuto that evening. During his time with the city, Surprenant said he collected some $600,000
in bribes that he was afraid to reject. “I was afraid of the consequences,” Surprenant said.

The Charbonneau commission outlined a dizzying web of corruption for which a letter writer to the Montreal Gazette offered a simple solution: appoint Vito Rizzuto mayor of Montreal. “Think of just some of the benefits,” wrote Terry Callaghan of Léry, Que., in October 2012. “No need for city councillors and the like; he has his own organization. He has extensive experience with high finance. He’s very familiar with Montreal’s infrastructure and construction needs. There would no longer be a need for bribes, payoffs and the like; middlemen would be eliminated.”

The inquiry also heard from York Regional Police Det. Mike Amato. The veteran cop was asked if he knew of any instances in Ontario where Mafia groups won government contracts. The query clearly hit a nerve. Amato had sworn to tell the truth but he couldn’t divulge ongoing police investigations. “That question there is too close to something that we are working on right now,” Amato testified.

The detective told of criminals in Ontario who appear wealthy and generous, making their livings as accountants, lawyers and entrepreneurs running banquet halls, nightclubs, garden centres and construction companies. “There are persons who are criminals, who are suspects in murders, who … go and coach soccer for kids. They’re integrated into the community and most people don’t even know who they are,” he said.

Amato testified that the top people in the Ontario Mob often give money to charities and fundraise for political parties. “It legitimizes your own persona. It legitimizes your criminal past. It’s almost like absolving your sins.”

Amato’s comments came as a joint investigation by the Toronto Star and Radio-Canada revealed the recent rise of the ‘Ndrangheta, or the Calabrian Mafia, in the Greater Toronto Area. The RCMP
has listed the group as one of its “Tier 1” threats in the area.

For his part, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty quickly attempted to distance his province from any taint of corruption. Wrongdoing connected with Vito apparently stopped abruptly at the Quebec border. “If there are some serious and warranted allegations, they need to be made in a substantive way, not through the media,” McGuinty told reporters.

“The first time I hear about this is through the media. And I would expect that people in positions of responsibility among our police services would be drawing this to our attention at the earliest possible opportunity.

“I have no reason to believe that they would want to keep this quiet and confidential if, in fact, this is grounded in reality. I would think they would have approached us in a constructive way some time ago.

“If there’s some truth to this, then let’s get it on the table,” McGuinty said. “Provide us with the background to this.”
Vito Rizzuto smiled broadly as he settled into his seat at the back of United Airlines Flight 3675, heading non-stop from Denver to Toronto on Friday, Oct. 5, 2012.

There had been no incident as he was escorted through the airport at the centre of a phalanx of tactical officers with submachine-guns at the ready. Now he could stretch his long legs, settle back for five hours and think of returning to his wife, two surviving children, grandchildren and associates. Perhaps he could even have a glass or two of wine. It was a little late in the season for golfing, but maybe he could squeeze in a couple of rounds after his flight touched down. He hadn’t played a game in eight years. It had also been eight years since he had any female contact. It was never too late in the season for that.

Radio Canada news footage captured the image of Vito’s smile suddenly evaporating as he saw a cameraman approaching him. Any time a stranger walks up to a mobster, it’s potentially very unpleasant, even if that stranger’s not carrying a gun. There was nowhere to flee, nothing to do but lamely try to cover his face. As the photographer snapped the unwelcome shots, Vito was trapped again.

It was dark when the flight landed shortly after 11 p.m. at Toronto’s Pearson International Airport. Vito was escorted from the public exit by heavily armed police, away from half a dozen media members. He was a free man now with a valid Canadian passport. There were parole conditions for the next three years, but
they applied only in the United States.

Vito disappeared alone into a limousine and the RCMP almost immediately lost him. By the time they contacted the limo operator to find out that Vito had been dropped off at a hotel near the airport, he was long gone from there, too.

Within an hour of the airport were a couple of his favourite golf courses, but it was too chilly to play comfortably when Vito awoke the next morning. He needed to meet now with people he trusted.

It wouldn’t be easy to head off to a restaurant, such as the one in Woodbridge where he met the area’s top Mafia figures in 1997, just before the bloody restructuring of the province’s traditional organized crime landscape. So many of his old haunts had changed hands or gone out of business. His rivals now held court in some of the new eateries that had sprung up near Hwy. 407, north of Toronto. Photos of Vito were in all the newspapers, news websites and broadcasts. Flying under the radar would take particular stealth.

Police could only guess where Vito was now, but everyone knew he was expected back in Montreal soon. A line of reporters and police on Antoine-Berthelet Ave. awaited his return. There had been speculation that Vito would attend the funeral of his father-in-law, Leonardo Cammalleri, who had died in the care of his family in Montreal a week and a half before Vito’s return. To the surprise of everyone outside the family, the funeral was held on the morning of Friday, Oct. 5, at the same time Vito was walking out of prison in Colorado.

Mafia expert Antonio Nicaso reasoned that the family made a last-minute decision to change the time of the funeral in order to shake off media cameras and public scrutiny. “It’s a precautionary reason,” Nicaso said. “Otherwise, the first day of his release would be at a funeral under the public eye.”
Mafia funerals are often gaudy affairs. The body of Vic (The Egg) Cotroni was accompanied to his grave in September 2004 by a 17-piece brass band and 23 cars bearing floral arrangements. Vic’s younger brother Frank (The Big Guy) Cotroni had an even more grandiose send-off in August 2004 from Notre-Dame-de-la-Défense on Dante St. in Montreal, where the ceiling fresco displays dictator Benito Mussolini on his stallion surrounded by Catholic saints. For The Big Guy’s funeral, a singer serenaded the living and dead with “Calabria Mia” while a band accompanied him on accordion, guitar and mandolin. As a final flourish, 72 white doves were released from four wooden cages — one for each year of Frank’s life. Some of the doves were already dead, but it was dramatic nonetheless.

In contrast, Leonardo Cammalleri’s funeral couldn’t have been more restrained. No notice was posted in the newspaper or on the funeral home website to announce his service. This had also been the case for the funerals of Nick Jr. and Nicolò Rizzuto. The family clearly didn’t want attention. People with long memories recalled how the Violi family had shifted the timing for the funeral of Rocco Violi back in 1980 when his murder signalled the end of the Violi-Rizzuto wars.

On the first weekend of his freedom, there was no sign of Vito at the York Region compound where he had frequently stayed. There was also no hint of him on Antoine-Berthelet. That Thanksgiving Monday, marked police cruisers slowly passed his mansion. A black BMW with tinted windows and four men inside looking like something out of a Martin Scorsese movie backed out of the garage. It was understandable if Vito was hesitant to return. His old home offered no comfort, just reminders of death.

It’s easy to think Vito is mustering his forces after his disappearance from public view. There is a family history of such tactics. In 1972, his father, Nicolò, vanished from Montreal after Paolo Violi
tried to have him killed. After regrouping in Venezuela, Nicolò unleashed a firestorm of murder against his rivals, including the Violi brothers, Paolo, Rocco and Francesco.

For Vito to survive this most difficult time, he needs some of the muscle and brains that helped sustain the family in the past. Some of his crime family’s top members have recently been released from prison, providing Vito with realistic hopes of launching a successful counterattack. There’s talk that Vito wants to meet with an old associate who lives in Kleinburg, Ont., and who is on strict parole conditions that forbid contact with criminals. If they are to meet, it will have to be discreetly.

There are also rumblings that three of Vito’s enemies in Greater Toronto have taken a liking to warmer climes and that another Vito opponent now has lumps under his shirt, as if he’s wearing a bulletproof vest. Some pulses in York Region must have quickened on Nov. 5, with news that the body of Giuseppe (Joe) DiMaulo was found outside his suburban home, victim of a gangland-style murder. DiMaulo had led a low-profile life in Blainville, Que., a community better known for golfing than mobsters.

No one who knows him suggests Vito has gone underground forever. A veteran police officer says there could be an awkward scene if Vito appears unexpectedly at a Toronto-area golf club that’s particularly popular with today’s new country club mobsters. Vito had loved its rolling fairways and the fine dining at its restaurant before his arrest for the “Three Captains” murders. During his time in custody in the U.S., the club became known as a key meeting spot for one of Vito’s bitter enemies. Like Vito, these rivals appreciate the contact with the movers and shakers of business and politics that golf clubs afford. “These guys, they’re more business guys than gangsters,” the veteran police officer says. “This is what they’ve become.”

Common wisdom suggests that Vito will resurface when the

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time is right, unless an enemy finds him first. The murders of his father and son cannot be forgiven, even for a man who considers himself a mediator. “There’s going to be a response, somewhere,” the veteran cop says. Says organized crime expert Antonio Nicaso: “In the Mafia, there is no statute of limitations for murder.”
Appendix

Original documents related to the U.S. trial of Vito Rizzuto

PETER EDWARDS has written for the Toronto Star for 26 years, specializing in organized crime and justice issues. His 11th non-fiction book, about life inside the Hells Angels and Satan’s Choice motorcycle clubs, is due for publication in early 2013. An earlier book, One Dead Indian: The Premier, the Police and the Ipperwash Crisis, was made into a movie for CTV and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network that was nominated for seven Gemini Awards. Edwards is co-author, with Michel Auger, of The Encyclopedia of Canadian Organized Crime.

He can be reached at pedwards@thestar.ca.