CHAPTER 2

Marseille Chicago

In interwar America the exploits and downfall of Al Capone had occupied many column inches of newspapers who were looking to satisfy a readership convinced of the country’s slide into decadence and perfectly willing to associate this decline with Italian immigrants of the Capone ilk. In France it fell to Marseille to accept the dubious honour of a reputation as a ‘European Chicago’. The Paris press and international news agencies thrived on it. Artists and film-makers loved it. The singer Alibert popularised it with his hit ‘Les gangsters du Château d’I’f’, as did the writer Carlo Rim with his script for the film ‘Justin de Marseille’. Rich gangsters, wearing made-to-measure suits and shoes, silk shirts, garnet silk scarves, putty-coloured overcoats, pale grey or green felt hats known as ‘Borsalinos’, with diamonds on their fingers and pearls in their ties, became symbols of the Phocaean city. Although exaggerated, there was some truth in this image and Marseille seemed the perfect stage for such a spectacle. André Suarès has written that the city was the ideal place to commit a murder with its numerous waste-grounds, not to mention the sea; excellent for disposing of a body. Despite its campaign to play down Marseille’s criminality, the newspaper Le Petit Provençal attributed the whole thing to an aspect of local culture reporting that in the children’s game of ‘cops and robbers’ few Marseillais ever chose the role of the cops. Marseille children formed gangs from their early years and engaged in street-fights with rivals from neighbouring districts. But it was more usual to link organised crime with the city’s high immigration levels. Most immigrants had nothing to do with gangsterism, indeed many were victims of it, but in any sociological profile of Marseille’s gangsters the Corsican community would undoubtedly be very well represented. In her work on immigration to the city Marie-Françoise Attard-Maranimchi stresses the overlapping of Corsican and gangster culture: both revolved around an exaggerated sense of personal honour, attachment to a clan, mutual solidarity and the respect of the law of silence.1

Three groups of gangsters are particularly associated with the Marseille of the 1930s and 1940s. The first was the Carbone-Spirito group who are said to

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have inspired Jacques Deray’s 1970 film *Borsalino* starring Jean-Paul Belmondo and Alain Delon. Charming and elegant, tall and lanky, nicknamed ‘the handsome piece of string’ (‘beau ficelle’) in spite of the smallpox craters which scarred his face, François ‘Lydro’ Spirito was born in 1900 into an Italian family originally from Naples. By the age of 12, he already had a Police file for theft and would have numerous subsequent scrapes with the law for participating in the white slave trade, for desertion, murder, assault, smuggling, carrying weapons and having false identity papers. In the 1920s he became the accomplice of Paul ‘Venture’ Carbone. Born in the southern Corsican village of Propriano in 1894, Carbone had moved with his family to the poverty-stricken Panier district of Marseille during his early childhood. The death of his father, when he was only 12, changed his destiny. This formerly hard-working pupil was forced to leave school and go out to work in support of his mother and younger brothers, Jean and François. Times were hard and he took up any small job he could find: newspaper vendor, dockers, sailor. He adopted the distinctive markings of outcasts of society: his numerous tattoos included ‘for the pleasure of the ladies’ inscribed above his genitals. Although he was smaller than Spirito, Carbone was very stocky and he had a reputation as a formidable streetfighter and knife handler. His physical courage saw him rewarded with a military medal during the First World War. After his return to Marseille in 1919 he began smuggling small quantities of opium and pimping for some prostitutes.

The Carbone-Spirito clan held considerable influence over Marseille’s underworld from the late-1920s, recruiting widely and putting their fingers into a number of pies. Together with their brothers, Jean Spirito and François Carbone, they owned the Amical Bar in the rue Pavillon and the Beauvau restaurant in the rue Beauvau, although ownership of this latter was accredited to a front by the name of Jean Noël. From here they organised prostitution, the white-slave trade, gambling, protection rackets and traffics of all kind, particularly of the increasingly popular narcotics: heroin and cocaine which they converted in a laboratory in Bandol near Marseille and then often forwarded to the American market, working in conjunction with Lucky Luciano. Using a solid business sense they would exploit any opportunity to make money: organising sporting events or taking advantage of embargoes and trade restrictions. Period 68° had been banned in France since 1915; this did not stop Carbone and Spirito importing it from a factory in Tarragone in Spain. Economic sanctions had been imposed on Italy in 1936 following her armed intervention in Ethiopia the previous year: these two gangsters smuggled in 34 tons of Parmesan cheese for Marseille’s huge Italian population, whose pasta needed flavouring. Civil war had erupted in Spain; this allowed Carbone to make money selling arms to Franco’s supporters. Paul Carbone also maintained prostitution rings