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FEW would have known the history of Frank Saviour Mifsud, one of Sliema's many residents who could be seen walking on the seafront promenade, where he spent the last years of his life.

The one-time traffic policeman had left Malta in the 1950s to make a name for himself in the vice world of London's Soho, where his 18-stone build would ultimately earn him the moniker that hinted at a violent temper: 'Big Frank' Mifsud, who recruited the Maltese to the Soho gang that would become known as 'The Syndicate', a vast call-girl empire built up in London over 20 years.

The foundations of the gang were laid by a family of Sicilians who at one time lived in Malta, the Messina brothers, who followed on their father's footsteps as brothel-keepers. In the UK they took up English names – Eugenio became Edward Marshal, Carmelo became Charles Maitland, Alfredo became Alfred Martin, Salvatore became Arthur Evans and Attilio became Raymond Maynard – by the late 1940s they were operating 30 houses of prostitution on Queen Street, Bond Street and Stafford Street.

When Scotland Yard swept the gang away in the 1950s, the foundations for Maltese gangsters were laid.

Bernie Silver, born in 1922 into a Jewish family from the East End, joined forces with former traffic policeman Frank Mifsud, their rise to prominence beginning in the 1950s by taking over the remnants of the Italian Messina Brothers gang.

Starting off with one strip-club in Bower Street, by the late 60s Mifsud and Silver controlled some 19 of Soho's 24 strip-clubs.

The prostitutes operating for it in Soho and Mayfair earned between £200 and £500 a week. The Syndicate acquired property in Soho, running strip clubs in the basement or ground floors. In the floors above, prostitutes operated full-time in separate flats, for which they paid £100-a-week rent.



18-stone gangster: Frank Mifsud smiles for the camera. He died, aged 91, in Malta, where he lived on the Sliema seafront, after returning here in the 1970s when he was acquitted of having commissioned a hit on another gangster

In the vice crime trial of the Bernie Silver gang of 1974, the Maltese Syndicate met its demise. Silver and nine men, mostly Maltese, were charged with living off immoral earnings between 1955 and 1973. Frank Mifsud dodged arrest when the gang was rounded up, but was detained in Switzerland and held in custody there.

With Silver, Mifsud was the main principal of the Syndicate.

"These men indeed have made a rich living," prosecutor Michael Corkery said at the trial. Documents found in Silver's Knights-bridge flat revealed ownership of a twin-diesel yacht, credit facilities in a Belgian bank, and property interests in the Channel islands. "That's just the tip of the iceberg," Corkery told the court, saying the Syndicate acted as rent collectors from some 30 Soho prostitution houses.

The Met police said the Syndicate would collect over £100,000 in rents from prostitutes every week.

Mifsud and Silver almost never dealt directly with girls, leaving the collection to the their front-men,

So famous... Mifsud is extradited to the UK to face charges in the Silver-Mifsud gang vice bust that also led to the corruption trials of Scotland Yard detectives, but Mifsud lived to see another day when he was cleared of ordering a hit on protection racketeer 'Scarface' Smithson

who collected the cash from prostitutes, deducted their own fees, then passed the remainder on to the bosses. "So the Syndicate prospered with the main characters keeping in the background at the time. They hid behind the others successfully for many years until the day of reckoning came," the prosecutor had said.

Soho vice trials

The day of reckoning came in December 1973, when freelance reporters working for the News of the World investigated the vice world in and around Soho, leading Scotland Yard to carry out inquiries that led to the bust of the crime ring.

At the height of the Syndicate's influence, most of the Metropoli-

tan Police's Obscene Publications Squad were in the Syndicate's pay, including its head Detective Chief Superintendent Bill Moody. But a 1969 Times exposé of police framing small-time criminals, and offering not to press charges in exchange for money or information, started to slowly unravel the Syndicate's network.

A series of other trials and exposures revealed a general picture of police-criminal links. Particularly favoured were Silver and Mifsud, with the discovery of a detailed ledger of the Syndicate's police pay-offs during a raid on the home of Silver associate Jimmy Humphreys. It led to hundreds of dismissals, forced retirements and the corruption trials of 1976-77 which resulted in 13 detectives – including



Clip-joint king 'Big Frank' Mifsud died at 91 in Malta, where he retired after running a violent vice enterprise in London's Soho for some 20 years. Prostitution, gambling, bribery and even murder was the legacy of the Silver-Mifsud gang they called 'the Maltese Syndicate'

two ex-Commanders, the highest-ranking British police officers ever to be convicted of corruption – being sentenced to a total of 90 years in prison.

Just as the 1973 police raids were due, Silver and Mifsud took off on an 'extended holiday' after being tipped off. But the newspapers later obliged with an elaborate pretence by Scotland Yard of having the warrants withdrawn and given up on the case. The ruse led to the Syndicate members to return to London. Bernie Silver returned from France and was arrested while he was having dinner with his girlfriend at the Park Tower Hotel on 30 December 1973.

One of the men who collected takings from the prostitutes was Big Frank's own brother Joseph Mifsud who "acted in a managerial role and was also a shareholder. From time to time, in his brother's absence, he also received this money collected from the girls."

Two other Syndicate members Victor 'Bajzu' Micallef and Fred Brett faced charges of kidnapping another Maltese associate, Frank Dyer, suspecting him of having shopped the crime ring to the police.

Dyer originally had come to London in 1947 where he married a Soho prostitute and collected rent for the Syndicate. He was twice jailed for living on her immoral earnings and left the country for Malta in 1959 after a warrant was issued for his arrest for again living off immoral earnings. Dyer later returned in August 1973 to discuss the purchase of a Berwick Street property in Soho as the crime ring started selling off the properties after the News of the World reports. But when the Syndicate suspected Dyer of having given the police a statement, they kidnapped him from a London pub, beat him up in a basement cellar and threatened him with a gun, and then offered him £20,000 to disappear so as not to turn up as a witness at the trial of the Syndicate.

Silver would be sentenced to six years in prison before Mifsud got extradited from Switzerland to face the same charges. But he would later get his sentence quashed on appeal.

Smithson murder trial

In the UK, Big Frank was also tried and cleared of the 1956 murder of gangster Thomas 'Scarface' Smithson, 36, having denied ordering the killing of the protection racketeer. Silver was convicted on 8 July, 1975 of the murder, sentenced to life imprisonment for murder and to ten years' imprisonment for conspiracy to murder, but later cleared on appeal. Mifsud's trial followed informa-

1956 Maltese hitmen take out East End protection racketeer



Thomas 'Scarface' Smithson was a member of the Billy Hill gang who was muscling in on the Silver-Mifsud gang's interests in gambling and prostitution. His protection racket put pressure on the Maltese Syndicate's activities and he was ultimately killed by Maltese gang member Philip Ellul, who was aided by Victor Spampinato.

Ellul was sentenced to death but given a reprieve four days before the execution. He was found in San Francisco, living on a park bench in 1974, where he was asked to be chief witness in the trial of Frank Mifsud for the murder of Smithson.

Up to no good: Philip Ellul and Victor Spampinato were members of the Syndicate, who were later found guilty of the murder of Thomas Smithson (above)



According to the Met police, the Syndicate would collect over £100,000 in rents from prostitutes every week

with the landlord, and that while he waited in a flat, Ellul came in and shot him in the neck.

That prosecution alleged Mifsud helped organise Smithson's killing, and that shortly before a remand appearance in 1975 at a London court, Mifsud said of Smithson: "He was a blackmailer. He only got what he deserved. He was always making me look small. I'm sorry, but he deserved it."

Ellul was sentenced to death but reprieved four days before execution. He served 11 years of a life sentence and went to America.

But in 1974 he was found destitute at age 47 on a park bench in San Francisco, and he voluntarily came to the UK as chief witness in the case against Bernie Silver and Frank Mifsud. But he changed his mind and returned to the USA. The jury of six men and six women took more than eight hours to bring in a verdict at the end of the week-long trial.

After the Old Bailey acquittal of 22 March, 1976, Frank's brother Joe claimed he was the victim of a frame-up. "He has never murdered anyone in his life and never would."

Carmelo Sultana, a Maltese cook, was however jailed in June 1976 for five nights after being found guilty of plotting with others to pervert justice over inquiries into

the murder of Smithson. Sultana, then aged 45, denied conspiring with others.

Frank Mifsud was also found guilty and jailed five years and fined £50,000 for suborning Harold Stocker to commit perjury during a criminal court trial of Maltese gangsters Anthony Cauchi and Tony Galea. The offence was the result of three petrol bomb explosions at the clubs at the end of 1966 and the beginning of 1967, allegedly at the behest of Mifsud. Cauchi was jailed for five years and Galea for two years. Harold Stocker, who ran a hotdog stall in Soho, had given false evidence in the trial of the two men.

Frank's brother Joe was later jailed for two years along with Joseph Fenech and Emmanuel Borg, for trying to bribe Stocker not to appear as a witness.

But Big Frank was until the last minute undeterred to see himself avoid prison time. Witness Dr George Grant, senior medical officer at Brixton Prison, was scolded by Judge McKinnon for attempting to have Mifsud re-manded into a mental institution without any prison sentence. "This seems to indicate a lack of touch with reality, for a senior medical officer... because [Mifsud] could be free [from] a mental hospital inside 12 months."

