MLex interview with Romano Pisciotti

Lewis Crofts speaks to the first European executive to be extradited to the US on cartel charges. Pisciotti talks of his experience at the hands of the US justice system and his time behind bars. Additional reporting by Leah Nylen

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Romano Pisciotti spent 669 days in custody. This included two hours in a police station in Lugano, Switzerland; 10 months in a jail in Frankfurt, Germany, fighting extradition; and eight months in a US federal prison in Folkston, Georgia, in a room with around 40 mainly Mexican inmates and a single corner toilet.

His crime: rigging bids for hoses used in the oil industry. His bad luck: being an Italian citizen passing through a German airport.

“I am totally ruined,” Pisciotti says wearily during an interview at his home north of Milan. “They destroyed me, my bank account, my family, my career. Everything.”

In April 2014, a German judge made Pisciotti the first European ever extradited to the US on cartel charges. That judge “destroyed a life,” the Italian says.

Pisciotti is bitter at the US officers who strip-searched him and then put his ankles and wrists in cuffs for hours as they transported him from prison to prison. And he is furious at the German judge who, in his eyes, aided the American authorities in his extradition.

But he is also grateful for the generosity of fellow inmates who lent him soap and a toothbrush when he turned up in the middle of the night with only the prison-issued shirt on his back.

A former tanker captain, Pisciotti stands six feet tall and has a seafarer’s heavy frame. He’s a big man with an easy, avuncular smile. But underneath, the 62-year-old Italian is seething at the extraordinary turn of events that saw him pursued across continents to become the unwilling posterchild for international cartel enforcement.

Touring the legal conference circuit, US Department of Justice officials say Pisciotti’s case serves as a warning to others considering price fixing. And it does. From a hotel room raid in Switzerland in 2012 to just months ago, when he was holed up in a grim cell with just a bucket and another man for company, the twists and turns of his story will deter others.

Pisciotti’s extradition shows there are “fewer and fewer safe havens” for cartel violators to avoid US prosecution, Brent Snyder, the Department of Justice division’s deputy assistant attorney general for criminal enforcement said in June last year. He said there was a “higher risk” of extradition and that this should encourage executives to cooperate with investigators.

But the case has taken its toll on Pisciotti, on his finances and on his family. He has struggled to find work and has shelled out more than half a million dollars in a legal battle that, so far, has failed on every front.

For its part, the US Department of Justice declared any responsibility for Pisciotti’s trouble.

“Romano Pisciotti’s decision to engage in a crime was the cause of any hardship and his decision to be a fugitive compounded it,” Snyder said in an interview. “He should not blame the US for enforcing its laws or seeking his lawful extradition. Our actions were the result of his choices.”

Pisciotti lives in a house on a hillside overlooking Lago di Varese. His mother and sister occupy the first floor. A ship’s wheel hangs over the fireplace in his front room, a token from the first decades of his professional life working on passenger vessels and tankers.

He appears relaxed now. But his story busts the myth that white-collar criminals get special treatment. There was no open prison for Pisciotti. No token sentence curtailed for good behavior. Businessmen may presume their crimes of market manipulation aren’t on a par with those of murderers and drug-dealers. But the criminal justice system in America made no exception for Pisciotti. He cooperated with investigators and pleaded guilty, but still ended up chained and cuffed, detained weeks beyond his official release date in a grotty immigration center. And all for a cartel he says investigators overcooked.

Released and back home in a small town outside Milan, Pisciotti agreed to
A career selling marine hose was a natural fit for merchant seaman Pisciotti

Il Capitano
Romano Pisciotti spent most of the 1970s at a nautical academy in Genoa followed by a naval academy in Livorno, training to become a captain in the merchant navy. By 1981, he had worked his way up from washing dishes to the captain's deck. He served on passenger boats, oil tankers and bunker vessels. The ocean and the oil industry have been his life.

In 1981, he took a job with Pirelli as an engineer providing offshore assistance to the Samed pipeline in Egypt that transports oil from the Gulf of Suez to the Mediterranean. Not long after, Pisciotti became a marketing manager for the company's oil and gas unit. The business itself would change owners twice more over the next two decades, but Pisciotti remained at the operation, eventually becoming division manager of the unit for Parker ITR, a Veniano, Italy-based manufacturer of marine hoses, which are used for loading and unloading tankers.

Prosecutors said the conspiracy began in 1999, when Parker ITR and five other companies agreed to rig tenders for the hoses. During secret meetings that took place in Key Largo, Bangkok, London and elsewhere, executives stitched up hose sales running to hundreds of millions of dollars to the likes of ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, Chevron and defense ministries.

Pisciotti doesn't dispute he took part in meetings and shared information with rivals. But he claims prosecutors exaggerated his involvement and the impact of the collusion.

In court filings and at the trial of one of Pisciotti's former assistants, US prosecutors said the Italian was one of a select group of men who arranged the conspiracy. He was "the number one guy in the cartel," they said.

Other cartel members called him "il Capitano," and prosecutors wrongly presumed that this meant he was the ringleader of the bid riggers, Pisciotti says.

"They say I was the Big Boss," he says, with a trace of disdain.

Pisciotti confirms he is a graduate from naval college. He explains that he spent decades working on boats. His résumé clearly lists his title. "Indeed, I am a captain," he says.

But when the FBI finally came knocking, hoping to crack the cartel, Pisciotti wasn't there.

Outside the cartel
In 2006, Pisciotti left Parker ITR to set up his own venture, Bassi Offshore. Because of the move, he wasn't invited the following year to a cartel meeting in Houston that was secretly taped by FBI agents.

Pisciotti knew of the gathering on May 3, 2007, and where it was taking place. It included friends and business associates. He was staying in the same hotel and attending the same industry conference
at the time. His former associates even talked about him during the meeting, and his old assistant, Francesco Scaglia, was asked to provide an update on Pisciotti’s new venture, which dealt in marine hoses but was too small to be admitted to the cartel.

Early in the morning the following day, FBI agents stormed rooms inside the Houston hotel, arresting the individuals who attended that secret meeting. The cartel included Bridgestone, Yokohama Rubber, Trelleborg, Dunlop Oil & Marine and others, and was based around rigging bids for flexible rubber hoses for the offshore extraction and transportation of petroleum, according to EU and US documents.

In Pisciotti’s eyes, the “cartel was really an association. Nothing more than that.” It was necessary so the manufacturers could stand up to the power of large oil companies and the handful of purchasers in the industry, he explains.

But by the time of the raids, “the cartel wasn’t working,” Pisciotti says.

“China came on the market and all of our raw materials were costing 10 times more,” he says. “The price was suffering a lot.”

Yokohama, a Japanese manufacturer, was the first to approach investigators, blowing the whistle in return for immunity from fines.

Eight of Pisciotti’s former colleagues were arrested during the May raids. All but Scaglia, his one-time assistant, would plead guilty and agree to serve prison terms of as long as two years. (Scaglia, and a colleague at Manuli Rubber, would take the case to trial in November 2008 and be acquitted. A major component of his defense: Il Capitano made me do it – a charge Pisciotti vigorously denies.)

After news of the arrests broke, Pisciotti recalls his first reaction was schadenfreude: “All the competitors are gone,” he thought. His second reaction was fear: “I’m in the US.”

For an instant, he considered renting a car and driving to the Mexican border, but then he realized this was the stuff of films. Instead, he opted to stay on American soil, sitting out the following three days he had left before his scheduled flight back to Europe via Atlanta. “My heart was in my mouth at passport control,” he recalls. “I wasn’t breathing.” Returning to his home town 70 kilometers north of Milan, Pisciotti thought he was safe. The FBI had missed its chance to arrest him. At the conference. At the hotel. At airports in Houston and Atlanta. Obviously, they weren’t interested, he thought.

Until a year later, when the phone rang while he was sitting in his office at Bassi Offshore in Gironico, a small town to the west of Como. It was the FBI.

Safe passage

Pisciotti didn’t know it at the time, but he was a wanted man. Internationally. Interpol had issued a “Red Notice” with his name on it, and over the following years, various police officers and investigators would wave it at him. The document, bearing a poor-quality copy of his passport photo, meant the US had placed him on an extradition list for corruption and cartel involvement. When he passed through an airport or crossed a border, guards were supposed to take him into custody and contact the US authorities.

This came as a surprise to Pisciotti. He had spent weeks crossing continents by airplane. None of the trips to Africa, Spain, the UK, France and Italy had led to any inquiries at passport control.

But a year after the cartel raids in Houston, Pisciotti received a call from an FBI agent at his office in Italy. There was one question: Are you willing to cooperate with the investigation?

Pisciotti agreed. He wasn’t a target, he figured, and it would help keep the Feds off his back. Surely, they would have arrested him already if he was a suspect?

Prosecutors asked him to fly to the US and testify against Parker ITR and his former colleague Francesco Scaglia. (Pisciotti, who has a good command of English, called them “persecutors” throughout the interview.) Although the executives arrested in 2007 and some of the companies pleaded guilty right away, Parker ITR held out and didn’t agree to resolve the case against it until late 2010.

Part of the deal US prosecutors offered would require Pisciotti to serve time in a US prison. After consulting a lawyer friend in Genoa, Pisciotti said no. There was no way he was setting foot on American soil. Instead, his lawyer

Romano Pisciotti’s selected résumé

- 1973-1981 Navy & Merchant Marine Officer, Marina Mercantile & Marina Militare
- 1981-1982 Engineer for Offshore Facilities, Pirelli
- 1982-1991 Marketing Manager, Oil & Gas Pirelli
- 1991-2006 Division Manager, Pirelli ITR Oil & Gas
- 2006-2008 Co-Founder, Bassi Offshore
- 2008-2011 General Manager, Pipe Coaters Nigeria (formerly Socotherm Nigeria)
- 2011-2013 General Manager, West Africa Machinery & Services
- 2013 Consultant in Industrial Development, Orlean Invest

Source: Romano Pisciotti

Source: Romano Pisciotti
went to Washington and met with the prosecutors. On his return, Pisciotti and the lawyer agreed on the best course of action: help the investigators.

He agreed to meet them at the US Embassy in London, accompanied by his lawyer. Prosecutors offered him a letter of safe passage so he wouldn’t be detained en route, and he got on a plane to the UK.

“At that time, I wasn’t expecting a disaster,” Pisciotti says. “I told them everything. I explained my position. I signed a declaration. Then they said: ‘Now, you have to come to the US and repeat the same thing against Parker ITR.’”

While he might have been willing to do that, the Department of Justice lawyers were adamant that he would have to serve jail time in the US, which was a deal breaker. Pisciotti was offered nothing in return, he claims.

“I was totally bankrupt,” Pisciotti says. Bassi Offshore had collapsed and he was still traveling a lot. “If I go to jail, who will pay the mortgage and who will support the family?” he thought.

They tried to sugar the pill, he explains. They said “some US prisons were like Boy Scout” camps and that it wouldn’t be too harsh. Pisciotti wasn’t persuaded and went back to work at his Nigerian employer and his busy international schedule.

For five years, there was silence.

Breakfast meeting

Pisciotti had hung his breakfast order on the door-handle of his hotel room. It was Oct. 22, 2012 and he was in Lugano, Switzerland, for the annual board meeting of the Orlean Group, a Nigerian company that was his new employer. He was due to give a presentation later in the day. Breakfast had been ordered for 6:30 a.m. and he was still fast asleep at 6:00.

Banging on the door woke him up, and, at first, he thought it was an aggressive bellboy with the breakfast tray. But as he shuffled to the door and cracked it open, he found two Swiss policemen.

“Stand in the corner,” they told Pisciotti, as thoughts of a potential traffic offense skipped through his mind. They proceeded to strip the bed, turn over the mattress and empty the cupboards.

“What are you looking for?” he recalls asking.

“Don’t know. We’re looking for something,” they responded.

After they had finished ransacking the room, they waved a photocopy of the Red Notice at him.

“We’re here to arrest you,” they told him. “Today will be a long day for you.”

But then they became kinder, more cordial, he says. They let Pisciotti shower and get dressed, and even enjoy his breakfast when the bellboy arrived.

For the next two hours, Pisciotti stood outside the main entrance to the hotel, with a policeman on either side, waiting for a truck to pick up his BMW garage, and drove back to the hotel, in time to give his presentation to the board at noon.

“After that, I thought this whole issue with the US is over,” he said. “I drove back to Italy at 40 kilometers an hour.”

Frankfurt

In June 2013, Pisciotti had flown to Lagos, Nigeria, to sign a new contract. It would see him promoted and his salary increased. With the freshly signed papers in his hand luggage, he planned to fly back to Italy and take a few weeks off before starting the new job. His usual Air France flight was canceled and instead he had to fly Lufthansa, which stopped over in Frankfurt.

That decision would cost him two years of freedom.

He got off the plane in Frankfurt at 5:20 a.m. on June 16. At passport control, an attendant hesitated, eyes flicking between Pisciotti’s face and his passport...
INTERVIEW WITH ROMANO PISCIOTTI

photo before he signaled to two German police officers standing to one side of the arrivals hall. They approached Pisciotti and asked him to follow them.

They escorted him to a police station inside the airport, where he was presented again with the Red Notice. The poor-quality photocopy meant the policemen had to check and recheck his identity. When they were satisfied he was the man they were looking for, they ordered his luggage to be taken off the plane to Milan’s Malpensa airport.

The officers took Pisciotti into custody and escorted him to another facility inside the airport, where he was put in a cell. The floor was concrete. There was no window and no toilet, and the bed was built into the wall. A policeman monitored him through a peephole in the door. Pisciotti used his suit jacket to cover himself up. When he entered the cell, Pisciotti had been on the phone to his lawyer in Genoa, and the guards overlooked the fact that he still had the phone in his possession when the cell door closed. Pisciotti took a picture of the cell and sent it to his lawyer.

When Pisciotti asked for food, a guard brought his luggage so he could fish out 10 euros to buy a sandwich. The guard went out and came back after a while, handing over a sandwich and his change. Everything seemed cordial and perfunctory.

The following morning, Pisciotti asked for a cup of coffee and the guard once again requested payment. Pisciotti dug around in his pocket and produced some change and – to the guard’s outrage – his mobile phone.

Pisciotti was then stripped, searched and only allowed to put his clothes back on once his shoelaces and watch had been removed.

The following morning, Pisciotti was cuffed and transferred in a caged compartment inside a police car to a tribunal, where a judge explained the extradition request.

In short, one country can send a suspected criminal to another country so long as the crime and the punishment in both places are the same. In both Germany and America, taking part in a bid-rigging cartel is considered a criminal offense. That was a sufficient basis for the US to demand Pisciotti’s extradition.

Pisciotti faced one basic question: The US had asked Germany to extradite him. Would he go or would he oppose the request?

He decided to fight.

His wrists and ankles were cuffed and he was put back in the police van and transported to a jail in Frankfurt that would be his home for the next 10 months.

“It was like a five-star hotel,” says Pisciotti wistfully, comparing it to the US facilities where he would later be held. “It was a single room with a normal bed and a normal window. There was a desk and a bathroom. I had control over the light and there was respect for privacy.”

In the US, Pisciotti would frequently change and – to the guard’s outrage – his language classes but usually just to chat and watch videos. Yet that was the exception: On a standard day, he would spend 22 hours locked inside his cell.

Pisciotti was identified as a flight risk because he had “no fixed abode” in Germany, according to Frankfurt court papers. So he had no option but to sit in jail and count the days, as his lawyers fought to stop his extradition. The months of legal debate that followed focused on whether the US criminal cartel offense was the same as Germany’s bid-rigging crime. In an initial ruling, judges concluded that it was. That meant Pisciotti was to be extradited.

Pisciotti appealed this ruling, saying it was unfair. Under German law, a German citizen would have been protected from extradition. In fact, another member of the same cartel, Uwe Bangert, a German citizen, had

Timeline of events

- April 1, 1986 – Earliest recorded date of cartel activity
- May 1997 to June 1999 – Friction between cartel members
- Dec. 20, 2006 – Yokohama files whistleblower confession
- May 2 & 3, 2007 – Antitrust investigators carry out dawn raids; cartel ends
- July 17, 2007 – Parker ITR agrees to co-operate with EU investigators
- Spring 2008 – Pisciotti travels to London to meet US investigators
- Oct. 16 to Nov. 10, 2008 – Pisciotti’s former colleague tried and acquitted in US court
- March 25, 2010 – Parker ITR pleads guilty in US, pays $2.29 million fine
- Aug. 26, 2010 – Pisciotti indicted under seal in the US
- Oct. 22, 2012 – Swiss police seize and release Pisciotti in Lugano
- June 17, 2013 – Pisciotti is arrested at Frankfurt airport
- April 3, 2014 – Pisciotti is extradited to Miami, US
- April 20, 2014 – Pisciotti sentenced in federal court in Fort Lauderdale
- March 16, 2015 – Planned release date from prison
- April 14, 2015 – Actual release date
avoided extradition by remaining in his hometown Hannoversch Münden. Bangert remains a fugitive from US justice. He hasn’t been caught and might never be. German prosecutors have written to Bangert to confirm they won’t be prosecuting him, and he avoids the long arm of US extradition requests.

“I don’t travel,” he told MLex in an interview last year. As an Italian, Pisciotti didn’t benefit from that safeguard. His lawyers argued this was discrimination under EU law and infringed his human rights. Prosecutors said only German law was applicable.

“After five months in jail, the appeal judge admitted that there wasn’t enough proof to extradite me to the US,” Pisciotti says. “The US had just sent a declaration from the FBI, not proof.”

What ensued enrages Pisciotti to this day. The judge gave the US authorities 20 days to send additional proof. After it arrived, Pisciotti appeared before the court again.

“The documents weren’t exactly what we were looking for,” he recalls the judge saying. “But reading them, it is possible to understand the cartel existed.”

“It is possible to understand,” Pisciotti says, repeating the phrase over and over. He sees it as his condemnation: “It is possible to understand.”

“On the words ‘it is possible to understand,’ they destroyed my life,” Pisciotti says.

His lawyers tried to take the case to Germany’s Supreme Court, but the judges there refused to grant him permission to appeal. The fight was over.

Appeal judges ruled Pisciotti had played a “key role” in the cartel, which led to Parker ITR landing 131 contracts over six years, at a total value of $73 million, according to German court papers. He was a “central figure,” they ruled, dismissing complaints of discrimination.

Pisciotti is seeking damages from Germany for what he says is the country’s discrimination against him. In January, his case will be heard again, in a Berlin court.

Frankfurt to Miami

On April 3, 2014, the day of Pisciotti’s extradition, three policemen came for him at four in the morning.

“They were worried I would be able to escape,” he says, in what is for him just another element of the absurd in his long fight to keep out of German and US prisons.

They stripped and inspected him before he left. The process happened again when he got to the airport and met the two government agents who would accompany him back to the US. He was allowed to travel with the clothes on his back, a packet of cigarettes, $50 and a small Bible.

When the German police handed him over to the two American agents, one of the US officers took out a small, heavy box and placed it on the ground. Opening it up, he unfurled a chain and two sets of cuffs: one for Pisciotti’s wrists and one for his ankles. At this point, the German police officer intervened.

“No, no,” Pisciotti recalls him saying. “In Germany, you follow German rules.”

The US agent had to put the chains away and escort Pisciotti unbound onto the plane. It was only a short respite. Sitting between the US agents on the back row of the plane, he was cuffed...
again and blanket laid over his hands to hide them from view.

“I stayed in chains for the whole flight,” he says.

There was a stopover in Chicago – where the chained Pisciotti was again put in a jail – and eventually he landed in Miami, where he was picked up by the sheriff and taken to Fort Lauderdale. He spent the next fortnight in county jail.

“It was a nightmare,” Pisciotti explains. “They keep you awake all night. They bring you breakfast at 4 a.m. At 11 p.m. you are instructed to shave. It’s impossible to sleep. Day and night, you’re subject to inspections. They were terrible, terrible days.”

April 20 will be one of the days Pisciotti will always remember. Wearing glasses, he shuffled into the courtroom in Fort Lauderdale, dressed in a khaki jumpsuit and restricted by leg irons and handcuffs. He was accompanied by two US Marshals.

He knew the sentencing would be a moment US prosecutors were going to use for “propaganda.” Although he was still fuming at the entire case against him, he had opted to plead guilty and accept a 24-month sentence as well as a $50,000 fine. It was the only possible option left to Pisciotti’s “substantial assistance” to authorities. His attorney William Shepherd told the judge that Pisciotti had thought they would take him back once he was released, but he was mistaken. He was released, but he was mistaken. He had employed him up until the arrest. He had thought the time studying a book on marketing and administration, and he assiduously went through it, page by page, highlighting sections that might help the company that he was working for. He offered to pay them back, once he was released. He was released and would send payment quickly.

Pisciotti wanted to serve his sentence in Italy. Under the DOJ’s International Prisoner Transfer Program, federal prisoners can ask to be transferred to a prison in their home country. An office within the department’s criminal division evaluates the requests and has the authority to approve or deny them. DOJ lawyer Lee told the court that the US wouldn’t object to Pisciotti’s request for a transfer to Italy. But this never happened. Delays and red tape meant the clock ran down and he missed the moment when a transfer would have been possible, in October 2014. That meant more time in American prisons.

Pisciotti was given credit for the nine months he had already served in German prisons, leaving 15 months on his sentence. He could do nothing but sit tight and serve out his time in America.

**Soap and toothbrush**

The threat of prison is usually enough to deter the moisturized and pinstriped senior execs of large blue-chip companies from breaking the law. They might be the fearless pit bulls of the corporate world, but having to bed down in a cell with a convicted murderer or a drug dealer is usually enough to make them think twice about corporate crime. That is the deterrent effect global enforcers hope to achieve by requiring jail time for white-collar crimes.

Pisciotti seems to have coped better than most.

Asked if he was ever involved in a fight in prison, he smiles it off. As a younger man, he spent month after month at sea with small crews. He has seen scraps, brawls and altercations. He has known cabin fever. The chest-beating of prisoners was nothing new to him.

After about a month in a federal sorting prison in Miami and a two-week stopover in a prison in Tallahassee, Florida, Pisciotti arrived at what he thought would be his final destination.

At eight months, the majority of his sentence was served at the D. Ray James Correctional Institution in Folkston, Georgia, a privately run federal prison with some 2,300 inmates. The majority were “poor people,” Pisciotti says, “but you have no idea what kind of human solidarity you find among them.”

“Every time you go from one prison to another, you arrive with nothing. You have to wait for money to be transferred,” he explains.

For a month of manual labor, an inmate may earn $19, which would be used to buy food or cigarettes, or to make a call home.

On his arrival in Folkston in the dead of night, the inmates had clubbed together and provided him with a toothbrush and soap. He offered to pay them back, once money had arrived, but they refused.

“All the people in Folkston, they made my bed for me,” he says. “The majority of people were poor, and they were really kind.”

Some were fishermen. Another was a pilot. One was a mechanic. Most were inside for drug trafficking.

But the prison itself was harsh. There was a single toilet and a single shower in the corner of a large room where 40 or so men slept. The prison attendants could see every inmate go to the toilet. When concerns about privacy were raised, the prison installed a wooden screen to shield the squatting inmate from the prison guards, not from the other inmates.

Pisciotti recounts the stories of others locked inside, mentioning perceived injustices at the hands of US prosecutors. But he gives no names. He passed most of the time studying a book on marketing and administration, and he assiduously went through it, page by page, highlighting sections that might help the company that employed him up until the arrest. He had thought they would take him back once he was released, but he was mistaken. They wanted nothing to do with him now.

Pisciotti kept mostly to himself. He had no visitors during his time in America.

His mother had been to visit him while he was held in comparative comfort in
“They had me in prison for a year,” Pisciotti says, fuming at the incompetence of prison staff. “Yet they said they wouldn’t release me because they didn’t know who I was.”

Eventually, a new passport appeared. Even though a free man on paper, he was put back in chains and taken to the airport. “I was kept in handcuffs right up until I was in the plane,” he recalls. It was April 14.

Pisciotti has nothing good to say about most of the people who crossed his path during the cartel proceedings: German judges, FBI agents, DOJ “persecutors,” Japanese manufacturers, Italian businessmen. Even his one-time employer, Parker ITR, the company he represented in the cartel, turned on him, he says.

While Pisciotti was still in prison, a lawyer for Parker ITR’s insurer called Pisciotti’s lawyer in the US, suggesting the marine-hose manufacturer had been harmed due to the entire cartel saga. Parker ITR wanted a meeting that could have been the prelude to yet more litigation. Pisciotti dismisses the approach as nonsense.

Only a select group of people receive kind words from Pisciotti: a handful of inmates, a polite prisoner officer in Germany, a friendly policeman in Switzerland, another executive in the cartel. His former employers had washed their hands of him and only a very limited circle of people stayed in touch.

Life now goes on for Pisciotti, but not how he would like. “After five months back here in Italy, it is impossible for me to find a job,” he says. “I’ve bought a ticket and a visa for Nigeria. I have a lot of friends there. A fine of $50,000 and prison was bad. But nothing compared to the fact that I won’t be able to do business in the US. How can I take a job if I’m not able to travel to the biggest market in the world?”

“Rule No. 1: Don’t enter a cartel with Japanese producers,” Pisciotti says. “Through takeovers and denouncing the other companies, the company is now the market leader even though its manufacturing quality is shoddy, Pisciotti says. For a man who spent much of his life in the industry, that still hurts. Yokohama didn’t respond to a request for comment.

In court papers, Yokohama admitted that its employees met with rivals at dozens of meetings to fix prices on marine hoses. The company agreed to pay $1.95 million to plaintiffs seeking damages from the cartel. In 2014, it acquired the marine-hose business from Parker ITR, Pisciotti’s former employer.

No passport control

Almost a decade has passed since Yokohama first exposed the marine-hose cartel to regulators. Despite the intervening years, Pisciotti can still recall with ease specific dates and events, recalling the ebb and flow of the case against him.

March 16, 2015 was always the date he was working toward – the end of his 24-month sentence. But when release day came, his ordeal wasn’t over: Prison officials had lost his passport and that technically made him an illegal immigrant, meaning he couldn’t be released.

He spent the following five weeks in an immigration prison near Atlanta.

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Home

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Life now goes on for Pisciotti, but not how he would like.

“After five months back here in Italy, it is impossible for me to find a job,” he says. “I’ve bought a ticket and a visa for Nigeria. I have a lot of friends there. A fine of $50,000 and prison was bad. But nothing compared to the fact that I won’t be able to do business in the US. How can I take a job if I’m not able to travel to the biggest market in the world?”

He has to “start again from zero,” he says, bullish that this isn’t the end of his career. He has a mother and sister to support, and a house to run. He seems weary but he isn’t going to give up.

We walk to his car for the drive back to Malpensa airport. He has a convertible BMW Z4 with red leather seats and an engine that growls. It seems glitzy for a man who has just spent two years in jail and all his money on lawyers’ fees and a fine. With the roof down, he opens up the engine and tosses me a cap sporting the words “First Mate,” to shield me from the wind.

“I had already ordered the car when I was arrested in Germany in June 2013,” he says. “It was delivered in July, when I was still inside. It was waiting two years for me at the dealer.”

The last thing he wanted following his run-in with a German judge was a German sports car, he jokes.