

While Calabria Burns

Judith Harris (January 11, 2010)



“I came here to find Heaven. I found Hell”

ROME – While Calabria burns, Rome fiddles (or rather, composes songs) and speaks of love.

The burning is literal. In the town of Rosarno, Carabinieri and police summoned from elsewhere in Italy to quell Friday’s revolt by an estimated 2,000 immigrants (of a total in Rosarno of 5,000) found a stunning arsenal of weaponry in the hands of the local population. In one punishment squad car were large cans of gasoline at the ready for burning down the immigrants’ shacks, plus iron bars and clubs. Elsewhere police uncovered a cache of heavy weapons, from Kalashnikovs to a missile-launcher with its long-range missile ready for firing.

The situation was grave enough that the clashes at Rosarno ignited a sympathy demonstration in Rome, with immigrants’ clashing there with police. On Sunday Pope Benedict XIV appealed for greater respect for immigrants, referring specifically to Rosarno.

The battle that began in Rosarno, which lies more or less on the toenail of the boot of Italy, began with a couple of bored young hoods amusing themselves by firing an air gun at black immigrants returning “home” (so to speak) after work. This was not the first such incident, but this one spread from the streets to a highway on the outskirts, where local thugs set up improvised roadblocks. The hunt for the black devil then led into the picturesque countryside, where the immigrants live in shanties without running water (read: without toilets), not to mention electricity. “I came here to find Heaven. I found Hell,” said one despairing Ghanaian, who, as it happened, is a university graduate



with a degree in engineering.

Two black immigrant workers were kneecapped, others beaten. No one was safe: one local woman, seeing a black being beaten, intervened. To punish her, her fellow citizens destroyed her car. The flip side was that another local woman, a pretty young mother, was set upon by rampaging immigrant workers and had to abandon her car, which was then torched.

But Rosarno is also the town whose elected mayor and councilmen were legally declared 'Ndrangheta-"infiltrated" thirteen months ago and replaced by a commissioner from the Prefecture, which is to say a police official.

There is a connection between clandestine migrant workers and the town's certification as a center for organized crime. Although it has existed only forty years, today Calabria's 'Ndrangheta is Italy's, and for that matter Europe's, wealthiest and most powerful criminal network. Its fairly recent formation, as compared with the Sicilian Mafia or even the Camorra, is part of its success. The 'Ndrangheta is still a family affair, whose comparatively recent migration into countries like Germany and the U.S. has made it difficult to penetrate. The Calabrian bosses live without the ostentation that the drug-rich Sicilian Mafiosi exhibited in the Palermo of the Eighties, but they wallow in money from cocaine, the arms traffic (police believe that the arms cache discovered Saturday came to Italy from Russia via Africa), extortion and agriculture. "How else can the consumer buy canned tomatoes in supermarkets for such a low price?" one investigator said.

From a fairly low number of immigrant workers today Italy has something like 1.4 million. In the South these clandestine workers are seasonal: in summer they pick tomatoes, in the autumn olives, in winter oranges and lemons. By their own accounts, they work 12-hour days, for which they receive E. 25 (\$37). Of this E. 5 goes to the caporale, or boss, who recruits them by the day, and another E. 2 or 3 goes to the driver of the bus who takes them to the farm offering work. Italian press reports say that these caporali are 'Ndrangheta underlings or at least mob trustees. Needless to say, the pay is under the table, with no questions asked concerning labor laws, worker safety, working hours, job conditions, taxation, or welfare contributions by the employer.

Sunday's editorial by La Repubblica editor-in-chief Eugenio Scalfari listed the government ministries and agencies which ought to have taken notice of and dealt with this specifically Southern Italian problem : the Ministries of Agriculture, Labor, Productive Activities and the Interior, and the Prefecture, the Carabinieri and the Regional Governor. (To this list I would add the Ministry of Finance, since the plantation owners are not declaring taxes and not making welfare contributions.) So where has everyone been, he asks: how is it that no one in charge noticed the mob-related exploitation?

Ironically, in the North, where the anti-immigrant sentiment is strong, immigrants are dealt with in a more coherent way, with a certain amount of community counseling and organization. The Northern League's rhetoric continues to demand Italy for the Italians, and to attack those in the Church who urge better treatment of the immigrants, yet they know full well that their network of small- and medium-sized factories would shut down without the workers from abroad.

Medecins sans frontieres (MSF) has a program to help immigrants at Rosarno; to read its hair-raising report about conditions there, see:

<http://www.msf.org/msfinternational> [2]



Links

[1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/12458rosarno1263198137jpg>

[2] http://www.msf.org/msfinternational/invoke.cfm?component=pressrelease&objectid=49692559-15C5-F00A-25FE0A15B62EBC93&method=full_html