

100 Years after the Messina Earthquake. An Interview with Ambassador Fulci

Marina Melchionda (December 01, 2008)



A few days ago the Consulate General of Italy in New York organized a conference to commemorate the event, an important turning point in the history of the international relations between Italy and the US.

It was the Italian Academy at Columbia University which hosted the conference “One hundred years after the Strait of Messina Earthquake: Emergency Management from Solidarity to Efficiency. The response of public Institutions to the strategic challenge of emergency management”. The event was organized to commemorate the centenary of the earthquake of Messina, defined by the Secretary of State and Chief of the Civil Protection Guido Bertolaso – present for the occasion – “the most terrible catastrophe to happen in Europe in the last century”.

The cataclysm, we must not forget, was an important turning point in the history of the international relations between Italy and the United States of America. By destroying 90% of the city’s buildings

and killing more than 100,000 people, it became an important and further incentive for thousands of survivors to migrate to America in search of shelter from misery and desperation.

The earthquake was also the occasion in which Theodore Roosevelt's country demonstrated a great spirit of solidarity towards the shocked populations of Sicily and Calabria : the White Fleet of the US Navy, which was circumnavigating the globe in that period, set a course for Southern Italy to assist the population affected by the disaster.

The seminary was organized in collaboration with the Italian Cultural Institute, the Italian Academy, the Regional Council of the Region of Calabria, the Region of Sicily, the City of Messina and the Regional Delegation of ANFE (Associazione Nazionale Famiglie Emigranti/ National Association of Emigrant Families). It was opened by the Consul General Francesco Maria Talò who promptly recalled this extraordinary act of fraternity: "This meeting has two aims: first, to commemorate the centenary of the earthquake of the Strait of Messina, giving just tribute to the American government that promptly assisted the survivors sending navy units where needed; second, to offer a new and updated image of Italy. To this purpose we have divided the program into three major scientific sections, respectively dedicated to the general management of emergencies, the management of health emergencies and the operations of restoration of cultural heritage damaged by the catastrophes".

The three panels introduced by the Consul General were enriched by the presence of distinguished representatives of American and Italian political, diplomatic and scientific milieus. Among them, Amb. Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, permanent representative of Italy at the UN; Achille Verzi, Academic Director of Columbia University; Catherine Bragg, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator of the United Nations; Antonio Borello, Vice-president of the Regional Council of Calabria; Professor Saija (University of Messina), Professor Yurt (New York Presbyterian Hospital at Weill Cornell) and Professor Legome (Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Hospital di New York).

It is more than just rare, it is probably unique, to find all of them in the same room, if not at the United Nations. Thus this event was extraordinary also under this aspect.

Former Ambassador Francesco Paolo Fulci, who represented Italy at the United Nations from 1993 to 1999, was deeply moved by the circumstance: "For the first time after so many years the magic team is reunited again. These people together represented Italy and defended its position in the UN throughout my mission in the organization. Among them, I am especially glad to see Giulio Terzi, an ace of Italian diplomacy"

The spirit of fraternity shared by the two countries transpired from every speech given on that day. It was the same one that deepened their friendship on that date of 1908 and that they manifested numerous times in history. The cases of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina of 2005 are just two of the many possible examples. In those circumstances, however, it was Italy that assisted the United States.

Katrina and 9/11 also represented a chance for Italy to express and show the excellence the country has reached in the fields of Civil Protection and prevention of natural emergencies. The outstanding competences showed in those occasions are mainly the fruit of years of mistakes and inefficiencies, as Bertolaso stated: "After the earthquake, Italians arrived in Sicily after Russians, Germans, Americans and English. We were deeply disorganized. The efficient system we have nowadays descends from that past".

Andrew Staten, Director of the Office of International Affairs at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (F.E.M.A.) of the US Department of Homeland Security, gave his speech right after Bertolaso. His words, however, were not so optimistic: he referred to Katrina as a "tremendous failure" for the National system and thanked Italy for the "indispensable assistance offered". He also announced his will to reform the federal agency so that it will be able to respond to these kind of emergencies more efficiently.

The debate was rich and complete. The audience was enthusiastic about this new appointment organized within the series "Colloqui Newyorkesi di cultura scientifica italiana - LINX XXI". The

majority of the people present remained until the end of the seminar and the awards ceremony: Richard Greco, former Assistant Secretary of the US Navy received the decoration of Knight of the Republic of Italy while Dario Caroniti, Counselor of the City of Messina, awarded Suzanna Brugler, representative of the US Navy, with a plaque.

The day after the conference, i-Italy interviewed the former Ambassador Francesco Paolo Fulci, nowadays vice-president of Ferrero International. We met him at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò where he was invited by Director Stefano Albertini and Baroness Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò to present his last work *L'ITALIA ALL'ONU 1993-1999*, *Gli anni con Paolo Fulci: Quando la diplomazia fa gioco di squadra*.

His diplomatic career started in 1956. He covered missions in Moscow, Parigi, and Tokyo after which he became Ambassador to Canada. From 1985 to 1991 Fulci represented the country at NATO and afterwards, from 1993 to 1999, at the UN.

He shared with us his impressions and reflections on the event and on the issues touched during the seminar.

Ambassador, what did it mean to you to participate at the event organized by the Italian Consulate in New York at the Italian Academy?

It gave me the opportunity to manifest, I think on behalf of all my fellow citizens, a deep gratitude towards the United States for everything they have done for Messina. Our city's main street, as I said yesterday, is dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt, US president at the time of the earthquake. We also have the Ponte Americano (American Bridge): it symbolizes the strong friendship the two peoples share.

Your intervention was part of the panel Messina 1908-New York 2008: Friendship between peoples and cooperation between Governments. Do you consider bilateral international relations to be still significant in the new global contest?

Not only do I think that they remain significant but I also believe that they will acquire even more relevance in the near future. Today we can communicate both by phone and internet, so we have the opportunity to make and keep many contacts on a daily basis. The new immigrants in the US, moreover, can maintain strong relationships with the family they left behind. This will be a new incentive for our governments to perpetuate and deepen our bilateral dialogue.

The velocity and efficiency of the modern means of transportation is also another factor to take into consideration: the spatial and temporal dimensions have completely changed. This allows many Italian-Americans who have always lived in the US to go back to their country of origin whenever they wish to. They search for their roots going to the parishes, walking around their family's native towns, looking through the public registers.

They contribute directly, from "the bottom", to the enhancement of the bilateralization of international relations.

In the past, nothing like this happened. I remember the time when I studied at Columbia University: back then I met many Italians who were afraid, or ashamed, to show their origins. Many tried to hide them by anglicizing their surname. Today it is completely different: people define themselves "Italians Americans"...and they do it with pride.

Which one of the speeches given yesterday fascinated or interested you the most?

I liked Hon. Antonio Martino's. He comes from Messina too and he told us about his family's experience with the earthquake. His grandfather wanted to spend Christmas in the countryside with the entire family. His grandmother, on the other hand, preferred to remain in the city and go to the theatre for the annual Christmas representation of *Aida*. Since at that time the man was the head of the family and the only one entitled to make decisions, everybody had to leave the city for the holidays. Martino justly said yesterday that it was thanks to his grandfather's decision that his whole family survived the tragedy. If not, he would not have been there at the conference yesterday. It is all about destiny. It is all because of fate.

And now what is the kind of relationship you still maintain with your origins and the city of Messina? Is there a value, a tradition, you have always preserved and kept during your long diplomatic and political career?

I am very proud of my origins, and I have always been. This is a sentiment I share with all my fellow citizens spread all over the world, but maybe mostly with those who settled in New York. Their eyes mirror their love and aching for that city. Yesterday, at the conference, I had a chance to dwell on this: many survivors of the earthquake came to New York and kept their origins alive. I met several of them while studying at Columbia University as a Fulbright student.

You lived in Messina until your degree in law. After that you moved to the United States to continue your studies. Those were the years immediately after the earthquake. Could you tell me what was the relationship, the opinion or, in other words, the bond your people felt towards the Americans, given that their assistance revealed to be fundamental for the recovery of the survivors and the reconstruction of the city?

I have a memory dating back to when I was 13, maybe 12. It was 1942: the Allied Troops arrived in Sicily. We looked at American and English soldiers differently from how we did with the others: we considered the former liberators, the latter conquerors. I think that this differentiation derived directly from what the United States had already done for us a couple of decades before. I do believe that without them the people of Messina would have had an even worse memory of what happened that day of 1908, when the calamity destroyed the city killing an indefinite number of persons.

And now? How has the relationship between Sicilians and Americans changed in your opinion?

Sicilians still look at Americans with great admiration. Many of my fellow citizens have always had the dream to start a new life in the US and benefit from the great resources this country offers. Here people also enjoyed greater liberties, such as the freedom from hunger, freedom of speech, and the freedom of political expression.

But when I was an adolescent the American government was already putting into force restrictive rules on immigration, so for many people it was impossible to go and establish themselves there. Indeed I am always surprised when I meet a recent Italian immigrant. Yesterday, for example, I met a person from Sinagri, a town near Messina. His family arrived here just in 1973. I consider his case to be very rare, but it is also the tangible sign that Sicilian people still maintain a great and deep relationship with the United States.

You lived your life between America and Italy. In particular, you spent six years in New York as the Permanent Representative of Italy at the United Nations. This period was an important turning point in your diplomatic career. What is the bond you share with this city? Do you feel part of it?

My affection for New York originates from the very first years I spent in this city, as a Fulbright student at Columbia University. After that, my missions brought me here several times. At first, as Vice-Consul of Italy; then as member of the Italian delegation when Fanfani was president of the General Assembly; and finally as Ambassador of Italy at the UN. I ended up loving this city and I do believe I owe it many of the most beautiful moments of my private and diplomatic life.

This evening you will present your last book *L'ITALIA ALL'ONU 1993-1999, Gli anni con Paolo Fulci: Quando la diplomazia fa gioco di squadra* here at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò. The work is a report on your seven years as Ambassador of Italy at the United Nations. Before the conference starts, let me ask you a question: what has been your contribution for the strengthening of Italy's position in the organization?

My seven years of experience at the United Nations have been with no doubt the most beautiful chapter of my diplomatic career. I had to face huge challenges: there was the concrete danger that Italy could be downgraded and I had to avoid this. When I woke up in the morning I looked at myself



in the mirror and thought: “How would the future generations judge contemporary politicians and also us diplomats if we lost this battle?”. In that period our country was sending hundreds and hundreds of peacekeepers in warzones and was contributing to one fifth or one fourth of the total balance of the organization. And it was still running the risk of losing the title of “great power”. I had the strength to face this challenge, even if mine was considered to be a “desperate tentative”. The situation worsened when Germany, Japan, France, Brazil, India, USA and Great Britain united to downgrade my country: everybody thought I just couldn’t make it. Many of my colleagues proposed me to negotiate a “deign capitulation”. But the world “capitulation” existed neither in my vocabulary nor in my team’s. I fought for my cause and finally our efforts were recognized: Italy still maintains its position of “great power” in the United Nations.

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