

Italy Seen from the Beach

Judith Harris (August 23, 2009)



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ROME - For journalists this is traditionally the silly season, when anything goes, as long as it's



entertainment. Alas, this beach season has brought a host of serious problems. But don't give up (or else skip to the last paragraph now): I'm saving the entertainment factor for last.

The first and most worrisome are the floating seventy-three bodies of would-be migrants to Italy from Eritrea on the African coast. Their boat was in deep trouble, adrift with a motor out of order, when it was spotted by the English-speaking crew of a ship somewhere between Malta and the Italian coast five days ago. According to one of five survivors who made it to the Italian isle of Lampedusa, which is only a short hop from Libya, that crew offered a couple of bottles of water, and then disappeared. The crew did not notify authorities that a boatload of human beings was in grave danger, perhaps—the conjecture is here—because of a new (and doubtless well meant) law that would give any helpful crew a degree of responsibility for aiding and abetting illegal migrants. Reportedly ten ships saw them.

When a body was spotted afloat off Malta, the Maltese authorities did not inform the Italians because that procedure, one, was unnecessary, and, two, if necessary, would have taken "four or five days."

The crude facts are that Italy is caught in a terrible bind. If they welcome migrants, more will come. If they do not welcome them, a few less will come, and more will die. There is no easy way out: be cruel or be besieged.

Continuing our tour on the beach, there is an immigration fall-out kerfuffle up in North Italy, where a forty-something Muslim woman showed up in a public swimming pool wearing what's called a burkini—a full-body cover that actually looks like a deep sea diving outfit. The mothers in the pool complained that the outfit "frightened" their children, and so the pool manager asked the woman to show the label on her burkini so as to ascertain that it met EU import rules. She declined; he argued that the health of his other swimmers was at risk. No comment needed: hypocrisy abounds—but will not resolve the immigration problem, any more than the recent agreement between Libyan leader Gaddafi and Premier Silvio Berlusconi has.

Of course there is political fallout, most interestingly between the President of the Chamber of Deputies Gianfranco Fini and Northern League spokesmen. For Fini, Italy should offer a degree of understanding of the immigrants' cultures, and not expect them to adopt Italy's immediately; for the League's Roberto Calderoli, "Fini should say something more properly conservative" ("Fini dica qualcosa di destra").

This problem appears all the more intractable when the big quarrel in domestic Italy is over the national anthem by Mamei. The Northern League says it won't sing the anthem because the productive North earned money for decades, and the money was siphoned off to the Mezzogiorno and then wasted. Here too there is hypocrisy; when I arrived in Italy the despised migrants were the Southern Italians who worked in the Northern factories, but rooms-for-rent signs in Turin still said "No Southerners."

My question here is—and I invite comments—if Italy cannot deal with its own internal issues, how can it come together smoothly enough to deal with the arriving hordes from elsewhere? The harsh fact is that people will continue to die in order to escape from Africa, and Italy is their gateway, but some will always arrive: take a look on any beach in Italy today, and African hawkers are selling everything from sweatsocks to buckets of sliced coconut. (A small caveat: a recent study of hawkers here showed that most are in fact Italians.)

And now, the most famous beach scene of all: Capri, where someone dumped toxic waste into the Blue Grotto.

As for the amusement, here it is. Noemi (of "Papi" fame) is on the Costa Smeralda enjoying a yacht holiday which has taken her only a few steps from the villa where she spent a rockabilly holiday with the Premier and a bevy of showgirls. The paparazzi just can't get enough of her, and she is basking in the limelight. She so has made it big that, when a passerby asked how old she was, her sassy retort was: "Hey, don't you read the newspapers?"

I told you you would be rewarded by reading to the end. I've kept my word.



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